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COME TO MY GARDEN

by Brittnay L. Proctor

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COME TO MY GARDEN

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Come to My Garden

Brittnay L. Proctor

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For Granny Bernice, Ryan, and Sula

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Track Listing (GRT Release, 1970)

Side A

1. "Les Fleurs" (Charles Stepney, Richard Rudolph) – 3:16
2. "Completeness" (Stepney, Rose Johnson) – 3:33
3. "Come to My Garden" (Rudolph) – 3:20
   [Introduction & Interlude] – Stepney*
4. "Memory Band" (Stepney) – 4:05
5. "Rainy Day in Centerville" (Stepney, Rudolph) – 5:24

Side B

1. "Close Your Eyes and Remember" (Stepney, Rudolph) – 3:42
2. "Oh, By the Way" (Stepney, Rudolph) – 3:01
3. "Expecting" (Stepney, Jon Stocklin) – 3:55

4. "Only When I'm Dreaming" (Stepney, Sidney Barnes) – 3:29
5. "Whenever, Wherever" (Stepney, Johnson) – 3:32

Note: The album was recorded at Ter Mar Studios, Chicago, Illinois, November 24–26, 1969. The original GRT release has a typographic error for "Les Fleurs" ("Les Fleur").

Album Personnel and Credits

Backing Vocals – Elsa Harris, Kitty Hayward, Minnie Riperton
Bass [Uncredited] – Cleveland Eaton
Design Concept – Dick Fowler
Drums [Uncredited] – Maurice White
Engineer – Gary Starr, Stu Black
Guitar [Uncredited] – Phil Upchurch
Liner Notes – Morry Roth
Photography By – Harold Johnson
Piano, Leader – Ramsey Lewis
Producer, Arranged By – Charles Stepney
Recording Supervisor – Dick LaPalm
Vocals – Minnie Riperton

"The rhythm section of the orchestra is made up of Ramsey's group, courtesy of Cadet Records" (1970 GRT Release of *Come to My Garden*). In 1969, the Ramsey Lewis Trio consisted of Ramsey Lewis, Cleveland Eaton, and Maurice White.

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I am thankful for my elders and ancestors for making a way for me and gifting me the fortitude and courage to do the things that scare me, including writing this book. No less during a global pandemic.

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Ryan Hadap Habil, you are the light of my life. Thank you for facing the world for me.

Lastly, all errors and limitations present in this book are mine and mine alone.

Author's Note

I interchangeably use first and last names to address the artists that came together to record *Come to My Garden* (i.e., "Minnie" and "Riperton"). This is done to reflect the contradictory moments of familiarity I felt writing this book and the impossibility of familiarity in writing a book about an album.

Introduction

When I was fourteen, my father introduced me to Minnie Riperton's first album, Come *to My Garden* (1970). I was deeply insecure and felt like I spent most of my days lulling along in a cloud of deep introspection. During my long rides home on the Go West Shuttle after school, I would listen to the burned CD my dad made for me on my portable discman player. Rides on the Go West Shuttle beat the 1.6 mile/30 minute walk from my high school to home, especially on a late spring day in the San Gabriel Valley where temperatures could reach 85+ degrees. Fare was a $1.00 (or less) each way, and I would pass the time by listening to music. I don't remember the brand of the player, but I do know it wasn't a Sony Portable CD Walkman because my parents couldn't rationalize purchasing one for ~$45 dollars. Rightfully so. The family couldn't afford it. The lesser-known brand from Fry's Electronics had better sound quality and was half the price. I was so consumed by the idea that everyone hated me (a concoction of the imprint of antiblackness and my adolescent self-absorption) that finding an album that made me feel loved just cracked my heart wide open. I couldn't pinpoint a self-proclaimed ethos, but I still felt held in my

turmoil, the depths of my feelings reverberating between happy-go-lucky optimism (a carefree Black girl), moored contentment, and morose pessimism; a pendulum moving through the highs, mids, and lows of adolescence. The album emanated a grandiloquent cool, one I sorely lacked as a Black girl coming of age in the San Gabriel Valley of southern California.

Technologies like LP/vinyl recorders to CD/MP3 and peer-to-peer file sharing applications (Kazaa Media Desktop, etc.) changed my exposure to music, but only insofar as I got to listen to more music, more frequently, especially music my parents played for me, exposed me to via vinyl, CD, and cassette tapes, including *Come to My Garden*. My father-daughter trips to the first location of Poobah's in Pasadena, CA (Walnut Street and Fair Oaks), which was a house flipped into a record store, were ground zero for my music education. The record store was located in what some have called "a sketchy part of town neighboring thrift stores, porn shops, and a free clinic," but it felt like home to me.[1] I remember walking down a set of fairly short, but steep—for my seven- or eight-year-old body—stairs to get to the front door where I was instantly greeted with aisles and aisles of albums, across formats. In addition to visits to Poobah's, my dad's lessons in Black sound also included quizzing me about music he'd play in the car. You might call it "Name That Artist or Tune." He'd load the car's cassette or CD player and press play and

[1]Mike Spitz and Rebecca Villaneda, *The Record Store Book: Fifty Legendary and Iconic Places to Discover New and Used Vinyl* (Los Angeles: Rare Bird Books, 2015), 53.

ask, "Who's that?" or "What song is this?" I would have to guess and guess precisely, before he stopped his inquisition. My mother's almost exclusive play of rap music in general and West Coast G-Funk in particular helped me pick up on the resonances of albums like *Come to My Garden* in hip-hop culture. These were my first lessons in learning how to listen to sound. They helped to attune my ear and treat listening as an *active*, not passive, exercise.

* * *

When I recognized sounds and techniques I had learned in concert band, alongside adjacent soulful stylings that my parents played at home, my two worlds were brought together. Compulsively listening to *Come to My Garden* shattered my band teacher's lessons on the hierarchy between symphonic and popular music. It also made absolute sense to me that Riperton's expansive vocal capacity and technique were met with composer Charles Stepney's fusion of chamber music, soul, and bossa nova. Riperton and Charles Stepney—composer, producer, arranger, vibraphonist, and pianist—established an inseparable musical bond birthed out of their almost paralleled starts at Chess Records and the subsequent formation of the experimental soul band, Rotary Connection. Their musical synergy as maestro and musician makes for an album that ensnares listeners in a supplication devoted to beauty, luminescent resonances, and heartfelt flowery sounds. Majestic and sumptuous, *Come to My Garden* is a healing balm filled with overtures of ambient exquisiteness that washes over you. I found a new approach to

music-making and my orientation to listening disintegrated in the best way possible.

Minnie Riperton (who was only twenty-two at the time of recording *Come to My Garden*) and Charles Stepney (who was thirty-eight) were early fusion artists, who not only troubled genre's compulsory preoccupation with taxonomy but also displaced the primacy of value in creating and cultivating Black popular music. "Fusion" music is the "merging of jazz, rock, and funk music aesthetics and practices and the subsequent (or, better, the further) blurring of these large-scale genre boundaries in articulation with other musical traditions that each musician engaged in a more limited fashion."[2] Despite its beauty and thoroughness, fusion music was not widely accepted as an emerging form of Black popular music in the early 1970s. Many critics questioned the efficacy of fusing seemingly disparate sounds (i.e., radio and music markets were still segregated and the anxieties about fusion revolved around the virility of a "whitewashed" Rock and Roll and "black" Soul/R&B/Funk). Jazz, rock, and funk writers, turned scholars, were concerned about the social and affective implications of this music. Challenging what Jacques Derrida terms "the law of genre" ("Genres are not to be mixed"), fusion music exchanged the logics of value in popular music for experimentations in sound, within, across, and against genre.[3]

[2]Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 17.

[3]See Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry,* Vol. 7, Issue 1, 1980, 55–81.

Treated as an outlier in her catalog because of its inability to "sell," *Come to My Garden* predates one of the "first" and most popular fusion albums of the decade, Herbie Hancock's *Head Hunters* (November 1973). Fusing sounds from soul, classical music, jazz, psychedelic rock, and bossa nova and revamping the psychedelic soul sounds of her former band, Rotary Connection, *Come to My Garden* broke the sonic mold of popular music of the late 1960s. Not only did it feature some of the greatest musicians, arrangers, songwriters, and producers of their time, it also boldly coalesced contrasting sounds that came out of soul music and chamber music. Instead of burying Minnie Riperton's voice, or the accessorizing of her voice that occurred with Rotary Connection, the album fully displays the depth and breadth of her vocal performance, while also allowing a Black woman vocalist to experiment with sound. Minnie didn't have to be pigeonholed. During those three days of recording at Ter Mar Studios, Charles Stepney put (the young) personnel's freedom to improvise above the motives of the music market to make the album "marketable" to consumers.

But most importantly, the album honored Riperton's voice and made way for her operatic vocal technique and training to be showcased. *Come to My Garden* strips away the reverberation of effects pedals common to rock (including those of distortion and overdrive) and forceful bass lines. The epicurean growl and grit of Rotary Connection's sound is replaced with opulent and luxurious orchestration. Ornamentation, common to both gardens and Baroque music of sixteenth-century Europe, appears

throughout the album, but is revamped into posh-soul balladeer-ing, replete with virtuosic flourishes. A lesson in coloratura (virtuoso ornamentation displayed by a high soprano), Riperton, by way of Stepney's composition, disassociates operatic vocal range and performance (in this case coloratura soprano) from genteel whiteness and aristocratic style. Both Stepney and Riperton, alongside Richard Rudolph (writer/co-writer of the majority of the songs on the album; 23), Ramsey Lewis (bandleader, piano, 34), Maurice White (27, almost 28, drums), and Phil Upchurch (28, bass), bring the operatic to soul and reconnects Black listeners and communities with the Black avant-garde. Jazz-adjacent rhythm sections, paired with the singularity of Riperton's vocal dexterity, fuse with minor tones and inflect the album with a somberness that is hypnotic.

What might it have been about Riperton's miraculous voice and Stepney's majestic compositions and production that initially unnerved industries? How did the trajectories of the artists and musicians that came together on those momentous weekdays (Monday–Wednesday, November 24–26, 1969) combust to divinely create one of the most idiosyncratic albums of the twentieth century and what resonances reverberate through its phantasmic disappearance into and through the twenty-first century? This book is an attempt to answer these questions.

* * *

In *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, Daphne Brooks maps the terrain of "black feminist sound," noting how

> the kind of meaning Black women artists have made, as well as how their labor has evolved alongside, is entangled with, and sometimes has played a hand in generating and responding to historical events, social and political phenomena, and material, social, and cultural life in America from the late nineteenth century through the first two decades of the new millennium.[4]

Building on Brooks's insights into "a Black feminist intellectual history in sound," this book uses a Black feminist sound studies methodology—an approach to the study of (Black) sound which foregrounds analyses of blackness, gender, sexuality, and political economy—to address the lived social and political universe surrounding Minnie Riperton's life and how her subjectivity—Black *and* woman and a second-generation Black Chicagoan by way of the Great Migration to the Middle West—shaped the production and reception of her work. Therein, Black feminist sound studies as a method highlights the "overlooked, underappreciated, misread and sometimes lazily mythologized, underestimated

[4]Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 6.

and sometimes entirely disregarded" work of Black women sound artists and performers.[5]

But more generally, the method uses Black feminist analyses of antiblackness—how white settler-colonial patriarchy shapes the Black extra/intramural—gender, sexuality, and labor to study and theorize Black sound. Black sound, broadly conceived, exceeds the format of music. It is the auralities, vibrations, perceptions of hearing, and aesthetics related to sound forged through blackness and its constitution in the "New World." Black sound eclipses logic and its rootedness in the written word while forging its own discourse and "meaning." The underside of my framing of Black sound is Matthew Morrison's analytic "Blacksound," which reveals "the material and ephemeral remnants of the sounds and performances . . . produced by African Americans since the antebellum era, from their development in localized contexts to their 'popular' or seemingly race-neutral packaging in the commercial music industry."[6]

Queries into Black (feminist) sound are surely not new. Across space and time Black thinkers and writers who have engaged in Black feminist approaches to writing about Black sound, using "black feminist publics" to maintain "for over a century and in a multiplicity of ways that Black women's music—made by many and not just the exceptional

[5]Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 2.

[6]Matthew D. Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 72, Issue 3, 2019, 789; 781–823.

few—profoundly matters in spite of what the gatekeepers continue to say."[7] Using Black feminist sound studies as my method and approach, my aspiration is to show how a Black woman performer, Minnie Riperton, was at the center of a metaphysical rupture in the sonic universe of 1970. Hence, this book is a Black feminist meditation with and "*beside*" Minnie, Charles, and all those who were a part of Minnie's maiden voyage, *Come to My Garden*.[8] I take on the *very tall* task of carrying on a tradition of Black feminist cultural thinkers who took up Black sound as their object of passion, dedication, and inquiry. To that end, my analyses of Black sound in the book span from close listening of Riperton's and Stepney's early work to the historicity of Black migration in the United States, renderings of Black women's gardens as artistic cartographies of love and brute labor, personal narrative, and reflections on the contemporary resonances of this far-reaching album. These analyses are meant to honor the monumental work that was and is *Come to My Garden*, as well as place the album alongside its more celebrated counterparts, like Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* or Funkadelic's two releases of the same year, *Funkadelic* and *Free Your Mind*

[7]Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 5.

[8]As Daphne Brooks notes, the genre of thinking that happens in the work of white male music critics eclipses the notion of thinking alongside the Black (women) artists in question of the said work. Brooks investment in thinking and listening "*beside*" Black women artists and those who safeguarded their work is a model I hope to replicate in this book. See Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 7.

. . . *and Your Ass Will Follow*. They also open an enclosed narration of Minnie Riperton's life and career. Beyond "Lovin' You" and her untimely passing.

The mysticism of the album has left listeners, both old and new, yearning for a constellation of sounds and aesthetics that proffers a transcendental experience rooted in the Black popular music traditions of the twentieth century (the late 1960s to early 1970s). Although Stepney and Riperton aimed to produce a work that would rival/compare to that of Burt Bacharach/Hal David and Dionne Warwick collaborations, the album was matchless. Inimitable. *Come to My Garden* spanned an abundance of (Black) popular and "classical" sounds. The album was born out of a young Minnie Riperton's desire and willingness to reimagine what a Black woman performer/singer of the (late) 1960s and early 1970s could look and sound like, much in the tradition of Black women artists like Warwick, Abbey Lincoln, and Nina Simone.

Should the recognition and celebration of *Come to My Garden* be left to the "discovery" of critics, who in turn, find it valuable enough to write about? Given the long practice of white and non-Black writers writing about Black music, Black artists still find themselves beholden to a set of evaluative analytics rooted in an "objectivity" that always seem to miss the damn point: Black art is not objective. It is akin to Black survival in a world where Black people were "never meant to survive."[9]

[9]Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," in *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 32.

Almost half of the collaborators of *Come to My Garden* are no longer with us. Death, the same as life, is sacred. It was immensely hard and uncomfortable to narrate people's contributions to an album when you've never personally known them and who are not alive to provide greater insight. Ever present with the fact that their passing is a void felt by family and friends, not just "fans," it is with great reverence that I try to write about this album, knowing full well that I might fail at capturing the nuances and some of the *facts* of the matter. I only write this book as a beloved listener trying to recall. And maybe in recalling I can reveal the immense uniqueness of this album and those that came together to make it. The collaborators of this work have disappeared. More devastatingly, the work has been erased and disappeared. Given the album's incantation of beauty, it is strange to consider its omission in American music archives and more generally in US-based media. It doesn't appear in retrospectives on Black music of the 1970s or in books on "fusion music"; you won't find it on lists like "10 Weird Albums Rolling Stone Loved in the 1970s You've Never Heard."[10] Most don't even know it is a part of Minnie Riperton's discography. Outside of (self) advocacy, what happens to their work?

[10]Gavin Edwards, "10 Weird Albums We Loved in the 1970s You've Never Heard," *Rolling Stone* (blog), August 30, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/10-weird-albums-rolling-stone-loved-in-the-1970s-youve-never-heard-77178/.

1
Andrea Davis Meets Minnie Riperton

Come to My Garden sounds like it dropped down out of a celestial ether. As endearing as it was forceful and as ambitious as it was astral and otherworldly, the etiology of the album is as nuanced as its sound. In order to better understand how Minnie Riperton's pièce de résistance came to be, we have to start from the very beginning: at Riperton's origins as a vocalist and performer. Or more fundamentally, at the start of her life.

Minnie Julia Riperton was born on November 8, 1947, on the South side of Chicago. Minnie's father, Daniel Riperton, was born in Hustonville, Kentucky, in 1900. He was two generations removed from chattel slavery in the state of Kentucky.[1] Her mother, Thelma (Matthews) Riperton,

[1]"Illinois, Cook County, Birth Certificates, 1871-1949," database, *FamilySearch* (https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QGCF-9M21: March 18, 2018), Daniel Riperton in entry for Elaine Riperton, October 21, 1937; Chicago, Cook, Illinois, United States, reference/certificate 39933, Cook County Clerk, Cook County Courthouse, Chicago; FHL microfilm; *Finding Your Roots*, "In Search of Freedom," Season 3, Episode 3, January 18, 2016.

was born in Kosciusko, Mississippi, in 1911.[2] Her mother "graduated from Rust College in Mississippi. She was an English major, and she couldn't find a job when she moved from the South to the North, so she ended up scrubbing somebody's floors."[3] Like other Black women who migrated from the South, driven by the promise of a better life built on newfound economic opportunity and an end to racial terror, Thelma was relegated to domestic work. In the essay "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," Saidiya Hartman charts the phenomena of newly arrived Black women being forced to produce domestic labor in the North:

> Black women regularly complained about being forced to labor as domestics. Domestic work carried the taint of slavery. . . . As free workers in the North and South, black women continued to labor as poorly paid workers in white households, tended and cared for white families, endured the exhaustion and the boredom part and parcel

In the following episode of *Finding Your Roots*, Maya Rudolph finds out that her maternal ancestor, James Grigsby, was enslaved by a man named John Warren Grigsby, in 1860. James was age five in a found plantation ledger.

[2]"United States Social Security Death Index," database, *FamilySearch* (https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VSCJ-1PX: January 11, 2021), Thelma Inez Riperton, March 10, 2005; citing US Social Security Administration, Death Master File, database (Alexandria, Virginia: National Technical Information Service, ongoing).

[3]Al Rudis, ". . . and a Singer with Sounds that Are Beyond Belief," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 14, 1974.

> of caring for children, cooking, cleaning, and servicing the lives of others.[4]

Despite Thelma Riperton's forced relegation to domestic work and her exploitation as a low-wage worker, she provided her eight children with the tremendous gift of music. She had also studied voice, sang, played piano, and encouraged each child to take up an instrument or to sing. Riperton was the youngest of the children.[5] She sang in the Sixth Grace Presbyterian Church choir, where her mother was an active member.[6] Unlike the Baptist and Pentecostal denominations common to Black communities of the US South and Middle West, which featured gospel music and instruments like the Hammond organ, worship in the Presbyterian Church almost exclusively revolved around the singing of Psalms or hymns, with little to no accompaniment. In an interview with Chris Charlesworth for *Melody Maker* (April 1975), Minnie clarifies the influence of the church on her training as a vocalist:

[4]Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 2016, 170.

[5]See Al Rudis, ". . . and a Singer with Sounds that Are Beyond Belief," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 14, 1974.

[6]For example, in February of 1961, Thelma Riperton served as co-chairman for the Sixth Grace Presbyterian Church's Calendar Club Tea and Fashion Show hosted at the Sixth United Presbyterian Church. See: "Photo Standalone 31—No Title," *The Chicago Defender* (National Edition) (1921–67); February 18, 1961, 22.

> "Church music?" "Nooooo," said Minnie, disdaining the obvious. "That's the old black story. Da gospel musk, no, no, no. In fact, I didn't go to that kind of church. I did visit them and I did sing in the choir but it wasn't one of those baptist gospel things."[7]

The emphasis on psalmody (versus "gospel things") in the church choir was an avenue for her to *hear* her voice. With little to no instrumentation she could listen to the full capacity of her voice and refine its other-worldliness. Almost immediately "her family . . . noticed her vocal quality and signed her up for theater and opera training."[8] At the (Abraham) Lincoln Center, she studied music, drama, and dance.

In 1898, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the reverend of All Souls Church, had the Lincoln Center commissioned to be designed by his nephew, Frank Lloyd Wright. Jones "hoped that 'the building will be emblematic of the hearty, straightforward ideal of the man for whom it is named,' and that, when completed, 'it will have a soul, the light and beauty of which will shine through and beyond its walls.'"[9] The mordancy in Jones's hopes is clear. Abraham Lincoln's political will to abolish slavery to the benefit of the Union/North was held

[7]Chris Charlesworth, "Minnie Riperton," *Melody Maker*, April 12, 1975. Retrieved June 17, 2021, from http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/minnie-riperton-2.

[8]Aaron Cohen, "Stay in Love: The Musical Life of Minnie Riperton," *The Langston Hughes Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2020, 192.

[9]Joseph Siry, "The Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* Vol. 50, Issue 3, 1991, 260.

in tandem with his antiblack and paternalistic governance that emphasized possessive individualism, obscuring "any absolute and definitive marker between slavery and its aftermath."[10] Just as much as racial uplift characterized the communities forged through Black migration from the South to Chicago, during the era of Jim Crow antiblackness colored the experiences of Black residents in Black-majority neighborhoods like Woodlawn, Bronzeville, and Oakwood/Oakland.

Bordering the Bronzeville and Oakwood/Oakland neighborhoods (700 E Oakwood Blvd, Chicago, IL 60653), the majority of the (Abraham) Lincoln Center patrons were working-class Black residents of the Bronzeville and Oakwood/Oakland neighborhoods. The center offered a gymnasium, public library, lectures and courses on topics like literature and religion, and classes in German and French.[11] In general, the Lincoln Center provided physical space for community members to gather and participate in city-funded programming. The design of the auditorium,

[10]Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press), 115.

[11]Jade Ryerson, "Settlement Houses in Chicago," US National Park Service, accessed June 24, 2021, https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/settlement-houses-in-chicago.htm. Currently, the Lincoln center is the home of Northeastern Illinois University's Carruthers Center, which "offers an undergraduate and graduate degree in Urban Community Studies to prepare students act upon the expressed interests of the residents of Chicago and to participate fully in the richness of the African and African-American cultures." See "About Us | Northeastern Illinois University," accessed June 24, 2021, https://www.neiu.edu/academics/carruthers-center/about-us.

including its use of brick and plaster and the "vertical wood strips [that] were added above the front platform," provided abundant diffusion to the space.[12] When the center first opened "it was said that 'the auditorium is unique in shape and if there had been fears in the minds of any for its acoustic properties these were speedily set at rest, for every word was distinctly audible in the farthest corners of the room.'"[13] The acoustically reflective design of the auditorium was perfect for the operatic vocal training she received from Marion Jeffery. Marion Jeffrey also served as her mother's vocal teacher. According to Minnie,

> I was her favorite student. She really taught me a lot of things. When I first started, we just learned about breathing for months and months and months, learning how to hold vowels and hear them and things like that. Then we got into songs.[14]

Outside of teaching her the fundamentals, Jeffrey encouraged Riperton to perform operettas and show tunes.[15] Imagine how clearly Riperton's voice could be heard throughout the auditorium space: Jeffrey imploring her to stand straight

[12]Joseph Siry, "The Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* Vol. 50, Issue 3, 1991, 246, 260.

[13]Joseph Siry, "The Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* Vol. 50, Issue 3, 1991, 260.

[14]Al Rudis, ". . . and a Singer with Sounds that Are Beyond Belief," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 14, 1974.

[15]A. Scott Galloway, Liner Notes, *Petals: The Minnie Riperton Collection*, Capitol Records, 2001.

and use her diaphragm to sing louder, to extend her phrasing. Sheila Simmons, the author of *Memoir of a Minnie Riperton Fan* (2015), notes that the physical address of Minnie Riperton's childhood home was 645 Oakwood Avenue. It was one minute away from the Lincoln Center—Kismet.[16] Between the Sixth Grace Presbyterian Church choir and her training with Marion Jeffrey at (Abraham) Lincoln Center, Riperton was well on her way to cultivating her instrument, leading to the daring vocal pursuits and risks that she took during the recording of *Come to My Garden*.

Although her "startling five-octave range suggested a career in opera . . . the genre provided few openings for a black teenager."[17] Between the systematic exclusion of Black vocalists from Western classical music traditions, like opera, and a newfound love for rock and roll, Riperton increasingly moved toward exclusively performing and recording (Black) popular music. She continued her vocal training in high school as part of Hyde Park High School's A Capella Choir, which only helped to further cultivate the strength and range of her voice. The director of the choir, Jerome Ramsfield, introduced Riperton to Raynard Miner, a talented

[16]Simmons recounts her archival trip in which she scours the archive of Chicago residential telephone books at the Harold Washington Public Library to find Minnie Riperton's childhood home address: "I am half-way through my second 'R' spool, when I spy the name 'Daniel Riperton.' This is it. My heart quickens. Minnie's father. To the right of the name is the address—645 Oakwood Avenue." Sheila Simmons, *Memoir of a Minnie Riperton Fan* (self-pub., CreateSpace, 2015), 36.

[17]Glen Matthews, Liner Notes, *Come to My Garden*, Not Now Music Release, 2017.

pianist and songwriter for Chess Records. The minute he heard Riperton sing with the choir, he knew he had found something special. At the age of fifteen, she was recruited by Miner and Rose Miller to join the girl group the Gems, replacing Vandine Harris, who had recently left the group.[18] Like most Black vocal girl groups of the 1960s, the Gems helped pioneer a new rhythm-and-blues sound and aesthetic. Not quite doo-wop, not quite rock and roll, not quite soul, but a gestation of Black popular sounds. Tracks like "That's What They Put Erasers on Pencils For" used the group's youthful charm and Jessica Collins's stirring voice to advance a distinctive Black "rock and roll" sound that Chess Records helped popularize in the 1960s. The most popular track the Gems recorded, "I Can't Help Myself" (1964), features a big band sound on par with rhythm-and-blues music of the 1960s. The time change mid-verse ("Why do I want to, oh, kiss your tender lips") mimics the frenetic panting of young lovers kissing in the cut as to not get caught. Raynard Miner's virtuosic play on the piano and Theresa Washum's earnest vocalization and warm tone, matched with a modulated rhythm section and impeccable vocal harmonies, made for a local hit but the tune didn't show up on national charts.[19] "I Can't Help Myself" was written by Leonard Caston and

[18]Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 106.

[19]Ibid. Riley Hampton, a frequently vetted Chicago-based arranger of Black popular music and the house bandleader for Chess Records, arranged "I Can't Help Myself." He also arranged albums released by Etta James, Barbara Lewis, and Curtis Mayfield.

Roquel "Billy" Davis, who was "a major figure in the music industry, who was the A&R director for Chess from 1961 to 1968 and the architect of the label's success with soul bands in the 60s."[20] Billy Davis took many Chess-signed artists, including Riperton, under his wing:

> Davis, as both a producer and an excellent songwriter, was the key creative person [at Chess]. . . . Many of Davis's songwriting staff people came out of acts that came to the company. Maurice McAlister and Leonard Castor Jr., came out of the Radiants, and Raynard Miner came out of the Gems. Miner in turn brought to the firm a talented partner, Carl Smith. Miner and Caston also served as producers.[21]

In 1966, the Gems dissolved, and Riperton began recording under the pseudonym Andrea Davis. The name Andrea Davis was chosen by Chess Records (an ode to Billy Davis). It was a name Riperton despised.[22] One of her few releases as Andrea Davis, "Lonely Girl" "was a local hit in Chicago in 1966."[23] The melismatic charge of "Lonely Girl" took advantage of the song's minor tonalities, which were arranged by Charles Stepney. Her performance of a slow

[20]Martin Chilton, "Who Was Andrea Davis? Revealing Minnie Riperton's Secret History," *UDiscover Music* (blog), November 8, 2020, https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/andrea-davis-mystery-solved/.

[21]Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 99.

[22]Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 107.

[23]Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

trill at the end of the track ("Ooh, ooh, ooh ooh/(Out here) / Ooh, ooh ooh oooh, ooh ooh ooh ooh oo-ooh") shows how dynamic and powerful her voice was, even at such a young age. The B-side of the release, "You Gave Me Soul," with its buoyant rhythm section and Riperton's jazzy vocals, dazzles and beckons movement. Billy Davis with Sugar Pie DeSanto wrote both "Lonely Girl" and "You Gave Me Soul."[24] Davis and DeSanto wrote "Lonely Girl" and "You Gave Me Soul" with the intention of showcasing the range of her voice. The release anticipates the magic of Stepney's and Riperton's collaborations. Listening closely, one can hear how Stepney stripped down these arrangements to highlight Riperton's unique voice, rather than subsume it in and through popular music conventions.

According to Raynard Miner, when Riperton first joined the Gems, "she first came in as a new starter . . . but in working with her gradually I was pushing her ahead of the other girls."[25] Gifted "with an extraordinary magnetism that tells you before you know who she is that she must be *somebody* and with a voice of astonishing range," Riperton could "reach up there where dogs begin to yowl and run for cover."[26] Her voice was singular, but in these early recordings we can hear how she learned from and was influenced by Chess label mates like Jackie Ross. Both Ross and Riperton

[24]Andrea Davis, *Lonely Girl/You Gave Me Soul*, Chess (Record Corp.), 1966, Vinyl.

[25]Robert Pruter, "The Gems," *Goldmine*, December 1979, 25.

[26]Clarence Petersen, "The Chicago Sound: If There Really Is One, It Probably Is . . .," *Chicago Tribune*, May 11, 1969, K48.

sang background vocals for James Phelps's Chess Records releases.[27]

In "Lonely Girl" and "You Gave Me Soul," you can hear how Ross's marriage of pop sensibilities with soaring soulful soprano stylings influenced Riperton. Listeners can also hear this approach on tracks like *Come to My Garden*'s "Only When I'm Dreaming." A cover of Ramsey Lewis's original from his 1968 album *Maiden Voyage*, "Only When I'm Dreaming" features a change in tempo from the original and incorporates a sped-up rhythm section with lyrics to the song written by Sidney Barnes (co-lead vocalist of Rotary Connection). Riperton synthesizes her guttural vocal ascension with the bounce of horns and strings. Paired with the springiness of Elsa Harris's and Kitty Haywards's backing vocals, which range from deep, low reverberations to piercing falsettos. Reimagining the bossa nova rhythm and harmonies of "Memory Band" (track 4), the song's double bass provides an infectious underlying bop and sway. Flipped on Smif-N-Wessun's track "Hellucination" from *Dah Shinin*' (1995), you can't miss the fusion of pop and soul sensibilities of "Only When I'm Dreaming"; mastered by Chess artists like Ross and Riperton, would influence the "boom-bap" sensibilities of 1990s New York rap/hip-hop.

Riperton, as a member of the Gems, also sang backup for Ross, Fontella Bass, Etta James, The Dells, and Bo Diddley. While Chess Records was adept in producing blues and rock and roll artists like Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, and

[27]Barry Fowden, "James Phelps Interview 2002," accessed July 19, 2021, http://www.soulcellar.co.uk/jamesphelps/Interview.html.

Howlin' Wolf, during the 1960s, the company fully embraced the new era of soul music. Robert Pruter, author of *Chicago Soul* (1991), notes how Leonard and Phillip Chess were able to adjust to the rising popularity of soul music:

> Chess brothers were able to adapt by bringing in from Detroit in 1961 Roquel "Billy" Davis as the company's new A&R director and staff producer. This move was the most significant development for Chess Records in that decade and paved the way for the company to become an important force in soul music and grow as a major independent.[28]

To say the compensation that Chess-signed Black artists received was inadequate would be a gross understatement. Although the company was able to get with the times, the culture of Chess Records, owned by Leonard and Phil Chess, still resembled that of sharecropping: white owners (Leonard and Phil) "allowed" tenant laborers to work in exchange for the security of "land" (in this case a recording studio) to cultivate and work in order to survive in a capitalist economy. For example, the Gems only received "$10 apiece for each background session."[29] Like Jackie Ross and countless others, sixteen-year-old Minnie caught wind of the exploitation of Black artists by the Chess brothers: "I saw people getting

[28]Robert Pruter, *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 98.
[29]Robert Pruter, "The Gems," *Goldmine*, December 1979, 25.

used, people getting messed over. I saw an awful lot of hit records that people never got any money for."[30]

Only a teenager, Riperton also started to work part-time as a receptionist and secretary for Chess, while juggling background vocalist work for Chess acts. For her sessions with Chess acts she "was paid $10 a recording," which was more than the $10 per gig she had to share as a member of the Gems.[31] These recording sessions "blossomed into work in Chicago's lucrative radio/tv jingles market, as well as background work for non-Chess stars, including Ray Charles."[32] After three weeks attending Loop College (now known as Harold Washington College), she dropped out to

[30]Al Rudis, ". . . and a Singer with Sounds that Are Beyond Belief," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 14, 1974. According to Nadine Cohodas, author of *Spinning Clues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*, Jackie Ross "was disappointed in the amount she received in royalties on the sales of the record. 'I walked into Leonard's office,' she remembered, hands on my hips and said, 'I want to know where the rest of my money is.' She was expecting more for a record that went to number eleven on the Billboard R&B chart and made it onto the pop charts. . . . 'I was not satisfied with what I was told,' she added. She disagreed with the notion that she shouldn't concern herself with sales royalties because the record was really a means to better and more performing dates. 'They sounded like I should be grateful because they put my name out there so I could work.'" Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Clues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (Iconoclassic Books, 2012), 341.

[31]A. Scott Galloway, Liner Notes, *Petals: The Minnie Riperton Collection*, Capitol Records, 2001.

[32]A. Scott Galloway, Liner Notes, *Petals: The Minnie Riperton Collection*, Capitol Records, 2001.

pursue music full time.[33] Riperton's ability to simultaneously complete her high school education, work for Chess Records, and pick up jingle work is a testament to her desire to cultivate her God-given talent. It is also a testament to her desire for independence as a young Black woman coming of age on the South Side of Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s.

Before she went by "Minnie Riperton," Minnie, with the Gems and as Andrea Davis, toured and played shows at legendary Chicago venues like Trianon (on E. 63rd Street) and the Sutherland Lounge (4659 S. Drexel Blvd). Given the homosocial environments of these clubs and venues (run by men, hosted by men, financed by men, most acts were men, etc.) she was often subject to superficial comments and evaluations about her appearance. At a performance at the Sutherland Lounge, featuring a bleached-haired David Scott and a young Riperton (as Andrea Davis), Minnie was described as "pert."[34] George Kirby once commented on a Rotary Connection performance he attended, calling Riperton a "young fox," and remarking that "the Afro-coiffed sister was good looking."[35] In the same reflection, he wrote about his sheer amazement at her vocal performance and stage presence, recalling, "her vitality was obvious even while she stood mute and listened as others did solos. On one

[33]Al Rudis, ". . . and a Singer with Sounds that Are Beyond Belief," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 14, 1974.

[34]See "Photo Standalone 11-No Title," The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921–67), May 6, 1967, 12.

[35]"Former Rotary Connection Star Joins Comedian Kirby," *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition) (1960–73), December 8, 1970, 11.

number she played drums with an intensity and togetherness that revealed musicianship that extends beyond her vocal talents."[36] There is not much written on how the nexus of antiblackness and sexism shaped Riperton's trajectory as a recording artist. Reviews of her early performances make it strikingly clear that while her musical brilliance was appreciated, it was only done insofar as it could be discussed alongside her "sex appeal" and (un)desirability. Although we know that the times allowed for such writerly sensibilities, it is important not to gloss over the sexualization of Riperton, however rooted in the vernacular(s) and sentiment of the time. The tension between embodied confidence, sensuality, and hyper-sexualization is a plight that many Black women artists faced in the 1960s and 1970s. Riperton was no exception to this rule. It would follow her throughout her career. For example, Riperton's "Inside My Love" from her 1975 release *Adventures in Paradise* is interpreted as a sexual invitation: a demonstration of her sexual prowess and allure. But according to Minnie, that exegesis, frequently made by white, male rock and roll critics, couldn't be further from her writing with an ear toward melodic romanticism:

> I wrote this song. "Inside My Love," and it was banned in a couple of cities. The song was about two people who meet and the woman was saying "You can see inside me, will you come inside me," and of course they thought I was talking about screwing. But if they'd listened to the song

[36]"Former Rotary Connection Star Joins Comedian Kirby," *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition) (1960–73), December 8, 1970, 11.

> in the beginning they could have understood the woman was meaning, "You can understand me, come inside my love and feel the spirit in me."[37]

Minnie lived so many lives between 1964 and 1970, including that of a model. What began with the request of Chess Records to take a trip to the Cleo Johnson's School of Charm and Modeling (8443 S. Cottage Grove) turned into a short-lived career as a model.[38] We could imagine that Minnie used modeling to supplement her income from recording and backing sessions, voice work for television, and commercials. There are little archival ephemera related to this part of Minnie's life, but a photograph of Cleo Johnson with Riperton, Lori Thomas, Margo Williams, and Wilhelmina Cooper (Dutch American model and founder of Wilhelmina Models modeling agency) shows Riperton excelled in modeling too, as all three Black models won trophies at the Modeling Association of America Convention

[37]Cliff White, "Feminism Is, Uh, Like Skinning Cats . . . or something like that, so it says here, in this double-date interview with Ms Minnie Riperton and Millie Jackson," *New Musical Express*, June 4, 1977, accessed June 17, 2021, http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/feminism-is-uh-like-skinning-cats.

[38]According to Cleo Johnson, "Minnie Riperton was sent here by the record company. . . . They said, 'We have a girl we want to send to you for you to get together, because she's just a hippie.'" Lauren Wiseman, "Cleo Johnson, Founder of Nation's First Black-Owned Modeling School, Dies at 88," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2011, sec. Obituaries, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/cleo-johnson-founder-of-nations-first-black-owned-modeling-school-dies-at-88/2011/03/17/AByO1Ps_story.html.

in May 1971.[39] In the photo, Riperton is the only one that donned natural hair (what seems to be a bleached Afro). Sporting a long dark dress, she stands with a cool confidence that is emblematic of her stature as a performer. Spectators and critics alike were enchanted not only by her voice but also by her ability to connect with an audience. Early on she felt a mutually kinetic and kindred relationship with audiences that would last the entirety of her career. Her noted graceful effervescence, charisma, and ability to conjure a soul-lifting light made for enchanting, unequaled performances. She once said, "I love any kind of contact with the crowd . . . I need to see the audience, have eye contact with them, watch their expressions and gestures and reactions. Somehow their energy transfers back to me. It's like feeding each other."[40] We can hear an intentional reciprocity in her recording of *Come to My Garden*, an extension, a benefaction to listeners, made possible by her time as Andrea Davis and return to Minnie Riperton when joining the Rotary Connection.

Chess Records' sound greatly shaped Riperton's embrace of a conglomeration of sounds and her approach to recording. Nothing greater evidenced than by her transition/recruitment to Rotary Connection. Rotary Connection was a "rock-soul band" that parted with "the strings, horns, and vocal harmonies

[39]See "Model Showcase . . ." (Photo Standalone 22), *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 1, 1971.

[40]"Inner Peace and Surrounded by Love," *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934–2005), August 7, 1975, Al4.

of" Chicago Soul music.[41] Marshall Chess, who "really liked that high C note of hers," recruited Riperton as one of the lead singers.[42] By November 1969, Minnie was recording for both Rotary Connection's *Dinner Music* and her first solo effort, *Come to My Garden*:

> Minnie was a busy lady in the fall of 1969. After cutting Rotary's fifth album, *Dinner Music*, that October, she made her own debut LP, *Come to My Garden*, in late November at Chess' Ter Mar Studio under [Charles] Stepney's supervision. Since Stepney also worked close with The Ramsey Lewis Trio, it's no surprise that the jazz pianist and his rhythm section (bassist Cleveland Eaton and drummer Maurice White, along with Chess house guitarist Phil Upchurch) play on this album, which emerged under the GRT logo. Its lushly orchestrated selections, (their authorship largely the responsibility of Stepney and Rudolph) announced that here stood a fresh new talent with unlimited crossover potential.[43]

Riperton's vocal training and range made her the perfect collaborator for Stepney. She, like Stepney, could amalgamate the seemingly disparate music sensibilities of Black popular music and Western classical music. A young Minnie is

[41]Aaron Cohen, *Move on Up: Chicago Soul Music and Black Cultural Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 65.

[42]Andria Lislie, "Marshall Chess Cultivated a Stimulating Studio at Chess Records," *Waxpoetics*, Issue 21, February/March 2007.

[43]Bill Dahl, Liner Notes for Minnie Riperton's *Come to My Garden* Re-release. Varése Sarabande: USA, 2002, CD.

anything but vocally immature on *Come to My Garden*. Her intrepid performance demonstrates her full trust in Charles Stepney's vision for a rigorously ornate oeuvre. The nuances and details of her performance evidence how her earlier work "develop[ed] a quieter mode of performance that accents more intimate forms of love and struggle."[44] On the album she slips in and out of "the dense atmosphere of orchestral interludes, ascending to her falsetto on the chorus and singing the verses in quiet, low tones."[45] Her diction is immaculate, allowing listeners to linger with her every word. Minnie's tone is bright and pure, unrestrained yet refined.

"Come to My Garden," the album's title track, is sung in a whisper. The feeling of effortlessness subsumes the listener into a lull. It is "easy listening," but imagine all the labor and energy it takes to go in and out of registers, to create vocal misdirection with a sudden change in volume, which can be heard when her voice soars from piano to fortissimo on "Only When I'm Dreaming." How her voice unfurls and ascends to the highest echelon or can be contained to a murmur is exceptional. Her use of edge and belting on "Completeness" sounds the heartbreak and desperation of unrequited love; the accent on "*I*" and "*my*" on the lyric "I need you, my love" splinters the philosophy of love as selfless. "Close Your Eyes and Remember" possesses a genuine sweetness. Tender and endearing, it avoids a kitsch adolescence assigned to young

[44]Emily J. Lordi, *The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience Since the 1960s* (Durham: Duke University Press), 62.

[45]Emily J. Lordi, *The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience Since the 1960s* (Durham: Duke University Press), 117.

pop singers of the time. The dynamism of her voice knows no end on *Come to My Garden*.

Sadly, the "crossover potential" of Minnie Riperton's early work never materialized. After the release of *Come to My Garden* and the completion of New Rotary Connection's *Hey Love* (1971), Minnie Riperton and Richard Rudolph, who began dating in 1967 after meeting at the Chicago rock ballroom the Electric Theater and married in 1971, packed up their family and headed for cross-country travels. Before leaving Chicago, Minnie lamented to Richard "I could do stuff here (in Chicago) for the rest of my life and it just wouldn't matter. I've got to get out of this pond!"[46] After time spent in New York (meetings with Columbia Records broke down) and with friends in Cape Cod, they finally landed in Gainesville, Florida. Their righteous disillusionment led to a brief life outside of the US recording industry, where Richard worked odd jobs, including "the weekend disc jockey" on the Gainesville station WGLV-FM 105.5. He played the slot from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.[47] In Gainesville, they basked in raising their children Marc and Maya Rudolph (Maya had just been born). Taking in the smaller pleasantries of life, they enjoyed the duck pond near their home and were "never in the mindset of feeling rushed to get back to the record

[46]A. Scott Galloway, Liner Notes, *Petals: The Minnie Riperton Collection*, Capitol Records, 2001.

[47]Mark Tyll, "Central Florida Radio: WGVL-FM 105.5 Gainesville," accessed January 8, 2022, http://cflradio.net/105.5_WGVL_FM.htm.

business."[48] On most days, Richard would play guitar and Minnie would sing and write songs on the fly.

Tracing the multiple lives Minnie lived, we see not only her drive but also her determination to find spaces and places where she could show up as her full self and develop her universe-bestowed talent. She wasn't driven by the fear of failure, but by an immense openness and intense curiosity about what the world *could* offer her. That paired with her creative industriousness, stout-heartedness, and courage to walk away from things that no longer served her, made for art that left listeners yearning and searching for the kind of unfeigned elegance displayed on *Come to My Garden*.

[48]Richard Rudolph as told to Harry Weinger, Liner Notes, *Perfect Angel: Deluxe Edition*, Capitol Records, 2017, 2 compact discs.

2
Charles Stepney's Popular Symphonies

Rotary Connection was the brainchild of Marshall Chess.[1] Under the helm of Charles Stepney, Rotary Connection explored the "amalgam of soul and folk while adding elements of psychedelia and classical music."[2] Stepney was recruited by Marshall Chess, son of Chess Records co-founder Leonard Chess, to develop the Chess imprint, Cadet Concept. According to Chess, Rotary Connection materialized out of his newfound partnership with Stepney:

> "Originally," says Chess, "Charles and I were to be the Rotary Connection. It was a matter of getting our ideas together, and we'd think of all sorts of things. Originally I wanted a spade choir singing this stuff"—referring to the

[1]John Fink, "Rock, Pop, and Soul: The Elliptical Connection," *Chicago Tribune*, May 11, 1969, K3.

[2]Aaron Cohen, *Move On Up: Chicago Soul Music and Black Cultural Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 68.

> rock standards, "Lady Jane," "Amen," "Turn Me On," "Like a Rollin' Stone," "Soul Man," "Ruby Tuesday," and others on the first Rotary album. "I thought what a fantastic combination this would have been. This fantastic 30-voice spade choir with the symphonic effect of a full orchestra, plus the electric guitars wailin'. I figured this would blow everyone's mind."[3]

The initial idea of a "30-voice spade choir" singing rock standards—here "spade" might be problematically used as a stand-in for "black"—didn't happen.[4] Instead, what Rotary Connection became was a psychedelic soul band revered for its traversal of the color line: its integration of Black and white band mates, following the tradition of bands like Sly and the Family Stone and the Jimi Hendrix Experience. The first iteration of the band was made up of Sidney Barnes, Minnie Riperton, Judy Hauff, Mitch Aliotta, Kenney Venegas, and Bobby Simms. Most notably featuring Barnes and Riperton as vocalists. The lineup varied during the band's eight-year run. But what was so engrossing about Rotary Connection was its sound. Charles Stepney as producer and arranger, plus his contribution on keys, was able to innovate a distinct sound that radically reimagined the lines between symphonic music and (Black) popular music forms like jazz, soul, and rock and

[3]Clarence Petersen, "The Chicago Sound: If There Really Is One, It Probably Is . . .," *Chicago Tribune*, May 11, 1969, K48.

[4]Beginning in the Harlem Renaissance the colloquial use of "spade" has been used to describe a Black person. See Patricia T. O'Conner and Stewart Kellerman, *Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language* (New York: Random House, 2009), 128.

roll. Described as "a gem of an album" Rotary Connection's self-titled debut *Rotary Connection* (1968) was co-produced by Stepney and (Marshall) Chess and arranged by Stepney.[5] Split between "Trip 1" and "Trip 1 cont'd" the album is a brief journey across Stepney's ever-evolving compositional aesthetic, which would consist of ostentatious symphonious compositions, electronic distortion, soulful-vocal musings, and jazz rhythm sections. On this first release, the vocal stand-outs of Minnie Riperton and Sidney Barnes had yet to have their voices fully realized with the band (their voices used ornamentally more than anything).

A portion of the album was dedicated to covers of rock and roll standards like "Lady Jane" and "Like a Rolling Stone," yet each track was reinterpreted by Stepney with utmost care and inventiveness. For example, for the cover of the Lovin' Spoonful's 1966 release, "Didn't Want To Have To Do It," "eight hours were devoted to perfecting the sound effects alone."[6] The cover takes the dreamy, cloud-like sound of the original in B minor and uses electronic effects such as tape distortion to sonically render how loopy and spacey heartbreak can be ("Didn't want to have to break your heart"). Most electronic effects that showed up on records during the early 1970s were created by the hard-to-get and expensive-to-rent Moog synthesizer, but Stepney's use of electronic effects circumvented this machine, turned instrument:

[5]"Album Reviews," *Billboard*, February 24, 1968, 62. Recorded in October 1967, the album had a brief circulation in late 1967, before having its full debut in February 1968.

[6]Mort Fega, "Focus on Jazz," *Cash Box*, March 16, 1968, 42.

> Although Stepney operates widely within the electronic field his approach is unusual. At a time when the rage is the synthesizer, Stepney cranks out, a great volume of material using alternative methods. "I had been anticipating working with the Moog for about 10 years before we did *Mother Nature's Son* on one," recalls Stepney. "Frankly, I wasn't turned on. That may have been because there's only one Moog in Chicago and the rent is so high every breath costs a fortune. But here I had been expecting all kinds of wonderful and beautiful sounds and found that the Moog produced no more than a new version of what we had before. Very limited."
>
> "I really prefer," he says, "what some might call the old-fashioned means, but what I consider the more resourceful and inventive means of producing the sounds we accept as electronic, I can get excellent effects by altering and distorting legitimate sounds with tapes and stuff. If you keep up on the latest developments in acoustics and electronics—you know, subscribe to various international engineering magazines you can pick up all sorts of techniques."[7]

In part, Stepney built his own aesthetic from the sounds of avant-garde composers like György Sándor Ligeti, Henry Dixon Cowell, and Joseph Moiseyevich Schillinger.[8] His

[7]Edwin Black, "For the Record: Charles Stepney," Vol. 37, Issue 23, *Down Beat*, November 26, 1970, 12, 32.

[8]Burt Bacharach studied under Henry Dixon Cowell, which crystallizes the comparisons made between Burt Bacharach and Charles Stepney. See "Burt

daughter, Eibur Stepney, recalled that her father had an extensive library collection; in particular, he had "books on electronic and wave theory, white noise and pink noise."[9] He

> knew where all of that was on the wavelength. Like how to use it and fuse it, basically, with music. Many of his books had been read more than three times. My grandmother said he wanted to go to Julliard and couldn't afford it. And she said he would hustle grocery bags at the store and save that money up and purchase the books that they would use at Julliard.[10]

Those books included Cowell's *New Musical Resources*, first published in 1930.[11] One of the first musical texts written by a composer from the perspective of specialist and technical studies, the text anticipated the rise of electronic music in classical music settings. The book "defines revolutionary (at least in Cowell's day) piano concepts, including techniques for elbow and forearm, cluster overtones, and resonant

Bacharach," *Britannica Academic*, accessed November 1, 2021, https://academic-eb-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Burt-Bacharach/471823.

[9]Kam Bhogal and Leanne Wright, "Celebrating Charles Stepney," World Wide FM, March 26, 2018, accessed August 21, 2021, https://www.mixcloud.com/worldwidefm/celebrating-charles-stepney-26-03-2018/.

[10]Kam Bhogal and Leanne Wright, "Celebrating Charles Stepney," World Wide FM, March 26, 2018, accessed August 21, 2021, https://www.mixcloud.com/worldwidefm/celebrating-charles-stepney-26-03-2018/.

[11]Edwin Black, "For the Record: Charles Stepney," *Down Beat*, Vol. 37, Issue 23, November 26, 1970, 32.

muting."[12] Cowell's work proved more than useful for a composer like Stepney, who was looking to use electronic sounds across music genres.

* * *

As told by Marshall Chess, Stepney was a nervous wreck before Rotary Connection's first recording session.[13] But Stepney's musical training and immense experience as a session musician more than prepared him for this moment. *Rotary Connection* made its way to #37 on the *Billboard* 200 chart and reached #1 in Chicago. The record demonstrates the sheer will of Stepney to produce work that was sonically ambitious and forward-looking. For a decade, between 1966 and 1976, Charles Stepney not only anticipated but also innovated a template for the progressive ("prog") rock that dominated the decade of the 1970s. The popular imaginary surrounding prog rock imagines the "intimate relationship between progressive rock and classical music" as built and cultivated by London-based rock bands like the Beatles. Pinning back your ear for the eponymous release *Rotary Connection*, we see all too clearly that Black producers and arrangers, like Charles Stepney, built the

[12]Edwin Black, "For the Record: Charles Stepney," *Down Beat*, Vol. 37, Issue 23, November 26, 1970, 32.

[13]According to Chess, at the first Rotary session Stepney was "so nervous about working with the new musicians that he broke into a sweat. Marshall had to calm him down before they could start." See Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Clues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (Iconoclassic Books, 2012), 406.

bridge between the popular and classical Western music traditions that typified "prog" rock.[14] (More on *Come to My Garden* and progressive rock in the next chapter.) Their sound, an unfussy mixture of soul, the psychedelic turn in rock and roll, and orchestral music, filled music venues like the Electric Playground (also known as the Electric Theater and later, the Kinetic Playground), between 1968 and 1970. A vanguard of sorts, Rotary Connection's sound mixed "the very old with the very new, and [did] it coherently."[15] His work with Rotary Connection is demonstrative of his dedication to finding his own sound and not emulating the sounds of the times, rather taking soul, pop, rock, and jazz and forging new paths in the Black sound universe of the late-1960s. With Stepney's innovation and guidance, Rotary Connection "helped change the whole musical landscape in Chicago, at that time shaping the careers of artists like Elton John, and Earth Wind & Fire."[16]

Sure, the band's self-fashioning could be read through the episteme of the 1960s hippy counterculture. Nonetheless, what made Rotary Connection different was its embrace of Black sound cultures across genres. What would the white rocker sights and sounds of this counterculture be if not for

[14]Edward L. Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13.

[15]Clarence Petersen, "The Chicago Sound: If There Really Is One, It Probably Is . . .," *Chicago Tribune*, May 11, 1969, K48.

[16]Sidney Barnes, "My time in Chicago 1967-1972," #312Soul: An Unfinished Retrospective of Chicago's Black Music History, February 15, 2020, accessed August 16, 2021https://www.312soul.com/stories.

blues, soul, rhythm and blues, gospel, folk, and so on? What would they be without the finesse and genius of figures like Charles Stepney?

* * *

From a revered session musician to the full-time musical director at Chess Records (1968–74), few others rivaled Charles ("Chuck"/"Step") Stepney's ability to compose (Black) popular music that traversed Western music traditions. Described as "one of those unseen workhorses whose business is other people's success," he was an innovator of "orchestral psychedelic soul" and "psychedelic blues." Born in Chicago, IL, on March 26, 1931, his early life is not captured in archives about Chicago Black music between the 1950s and 1970s and evades many of the histories on Chicago blues and Chess Records. Although there is not much archival information regarding his early life, we do know that his love for music began in his childhood. His passion for music came from his grandmother. She was "a church organist and taught him how to play piano. She played all of Chicago and even had accompanied Mahalia Jackson."[17] His "formal" study of music began at DuSable High School under the tutelage of Captain Wayne Dyett.[18] Stepney would

[17]Kam Bhogal and Leanne Wright, "Celebrating Charles Stepney," World Wide FM, March 26, 2018, accessed August 21, 2021, https://www.mixcloud.com/worldwidefm/celebrating-charles-stepney-26-03-2018/.

[18]Daniel John Carroll, "Stepney, Charles," *Grove Music Online*, January 20 2016, accessed August 5, 2021, https://www.oxfordmusiconline

go on to attend Wilson Junior College and Chicago Music College (which later became Roosevelt University), where he received classical music training.[19]

Early on in his career, Charles "sessioned with Milt Jackson, the late Charlie Parker and other greats."[20] He also played with the Johnnie Pate Trio for Johnnie Pate Trio Plus Three's *Jazz Goes Ivy League* (Federal, 1958). The album moved from a harder bop of the trio's first release, *The Johnnie Pate Trio* (1956), to a more relaxed and seductive sound. Of note, the album framed the figure of the "Ivy Leaguer" as one that "no longer can be confined to our colleges."[21] Someone who "dares normal convention in his attire, general appearance and way of life," and is "willing . . . to accept new concepts and ideas."[22] Stepney's musical spirit embodied this ethos. Although one reviewer of the album remarked, "Vibist Stepney displays considerable facility and modern conception but lacks the authority that could really spark his playing," this early in his career Stepney showed

.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002289483.

[19]Aaron Cohen, *Move on Up: Chicago Soul Music and Black Cultural Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 8.

[20]Liner notes for *Jazz Goes Ivy League* by Johnnie Pate Trio Plus Three. Federal, 1958, Vinyl.

[21]Liner notes for *Jazz Goes Ivy League* by Johnnie Pate Trio Plus Three. Federal, 1958, Vinyl.

[22]Liner notes for *Jazz Goes Ivy League* by Johnnie Pate Trio Plus Three. Federal, 1958, Vinyl.

signs of ingenious instrumentation.[23] His use of double time in his vibraphone solo on "Karen" elegantly breaks from the processional sway of the ballad providing listeners a nice break from the tender lull of Wilbur Wynne's guitar play. In a fleeting kind of way, it reminds listeners that jazz music was once dance music.

In addition to playing in conjunction with the Johnnie Pate Trio, Stepney appeared on records like Lorez Alexandria's *Lorez Sings Pres: A Late Session at An Intimate Club (A Tribute To Lester Young)* (King Records 1957, Federal 1958), which was recorded live "in an intimate club in Chicago."[24] In a review of the album for *Down Beat* magazine, John A. Tynan describes his "style" on vibes as "delicate to the point of gutlessness, though his phrasing and conception are rich."[25] Listening closer, Charles Stepney's thirty-second solo for the last number of the night "Jumpin' With Symphony Sid" is an attentive and complementary rejoinder to Alexandria's magisterial scatting at the beginning of the number. Although brief, the solo shows the beginnings of Stepney's musical aesthetic. His "delicate" yet no less adept

[23]John A. Tynan, Review of Johnnie Pate Trio, Plus Three's *Jazz Goes Ivy League* for "jazz records," *Down Beat*, Vol. 25, Issue 5, March 6, 1958, 32. For *Jazz Goes Ivy League* (Federal, 1958) the Johnnie Pate Trio consisted of Jonnie Pate, Vernal Fournier, Lenny Druss; Plus Three Charles Stepney, Wilbur Wynne, Floyd Morris.

[24]Liner notes for *Lorez Sings Pres: A Late Session at An Intimate Club (A Tribute To Lester Young)* by Lorez Alexandria, Federal, 1958, Vinyl.

[25]John A. Tynan, Review of Lorez Alexandria's *Lorez Sings Pres: A Tribute to Lester Young* for "jazz records," *Down Beat*, Vol. 25, Issue 5, March 6, 1958, 25.

play was meant to hold in sound Vernel Fournier's play on the drums. After all, Fournier, former house drummer at the Beehive Lounge (1503 E. 55th Street) had accompanied the subject of the tribute, Lester Young, a few times. His ear for compositional balance was unmatched. As Leanne Wright notes, "layering [was] an important part of the rich Stepney sound."[26]

He was also a member of the Jazz Jets. The group included "Eddie Harris, tenor saxophone, doubling piano; Charles Stepney, vibraharp, doubling piano; Don Garrett, bass; Walter McCants, drums."[27] The Jazz Jets didn't record any record but played live shows at venues across the city of Chicago. Due to its unique quality, the quartet's sound was compared to "what Ornette Coleman [was] doing."[28] Bandleader Eddie Harris, who was also an alum of DuSable High School and Roosevelt University and "a member of the Seventh Army band in Germany," had a great deal of influence on Stepney.[29] Harris, who studied "Middle and Far Eastern music, particularly that of India, and applying it to his writing and his playing," exposed him to the sonic landscape of Western

[26]Kam Bhogal and Leanne Wright, "Celebrating Charles Stepney," World Wide FM, March 26, 2018, accessed August 21, 2021, https://www.mixcloud.com/worldwidefm/celebrating-charles-stepney-26-03-2018/.

[27]Gene Lees, "Caught in the Act: The Jazz Jets, Archway Club, Chicago," *Down Beat*, Vol. 26, Issue 25, December 10, 1959, 60.

[28]Gene Lees, "Caught in the Act: The Jazz Jets, Archway Club, Chicago," *Down Beat*, Vol. 26, Issue 25, December 10, 1959, 60.

[29]"All-Chicago Talent Package To Headline Defender Show," *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), September 22, 1962.

and Southeast Asia.[30] This soundscape would feature prominently in Stepney's work, especially in his work with the Rotary Connection. From Harris, Charles also learned how cutthroat playing in clubs could be. He once recalled, "it was play good or don't even bother gettin' up on that stage. 'Cause if you got up there and played bad,' he remembers, 'the other musicians and audiences would just kick your butt. Matter of fact, Eddie Harris was getting his kicked regularly back then; he just could not play the sax—of course, that was back then.'"[31] Stepney also knew well the limitations of formal education for a Black musician. He quickly "learned ... that all that bullshit they teach you in school is just that—walk out of the toilet and it's worth nothing." "School" couldn't teach him how to get session work; veterans in the business, like Phil Wright, taught him that. Nor could "school" teach him how to develop his distinctive style. To do that, he fully immersed in the Black musical community of Chicago. Stepney not only performed in clubs across the city but also performed for community events like the *Chicago Defender*'s Annual Home Service Show, which annually showcased the finest Black musical talent Chicago had to offer.[32]

[30]Gene Lees, "Caught in the Act: The Jazz Jets, Archway Club, Chicago," *Down Beat*, Vol. 26, Issue 25, December 10, 1959, 60.

[31]Edwin Black, "For the Record: Charles Stepney," *Down Beat*, Vol. 37, Issue 23, November 26, 1970, 12.

[32]For the Chicago Defender's 28th Annual Home Service Show (October 5–7, 1962) Stepney performed with his trio, which one might assume consisted of Stepney, Wilbur Wynne, and Floyd Morris, alongside The Dells.

With a résumé like his, it is hard to imagine that by the 1960s, Charles Stepney was contemplating leaving the field of music altogether, but the pressures of being a session musician in Chicago were often insurmountable. The labor was contingent, and musicians could be let go on a whim. It was exhausting to try to work enough to make ends meet and even more exhausting to try to break out as a full-time musician. According to Aaron Cohen, "no welcoming performance venue for black composers of other music existed in those years, but . . . with new attitudes emerging in the later 1960s, Stepney had a place to bring modern classical concepts to pop music."[33] In one of the only interviews Stepney did during the span of his twenty-year career, he elaborates on this critical juncture in his life:

> I was broke and convinced I would never make it in this field . . . maybe I ought to try being a shoe salesman or a bookkeeper or something . . . and I was going to sell my vibes, but my mother kept telling me to hang on a little longer. But the day I was going to deliver the vibes to some other cat, Phil Wright at Chess have me a call and said he'd heard me playing with Eddie Harris . . . I think we were the Jazz Jets or some cornball name like that . . . and he asked me to come in and play a session in the studio.

"All-Chicago Talent Package To Headline Defender Show," *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), September 22, 1962.

[33]Aaron Cohen, *Move On Up: Chicago Soul Music and Black Cultural Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 69.

> Okay, one day's bread. I didn't figure this would make my career, so I was still going to give up the vibes.[34]

Fate intervened, and Charles's quest for some semblance of stability seemed to be on the horizon after Wright's call. He would continue as a session musician, primarily playing for Chess and its imprints like Argo/Cadet. For example, he played vibes on albums like the King Fleming Trio's *Stand By* (Argo, 1962) and piano on albums like the Herb Lance's *The Comeback* (Chess, 1966); he doubled on piano and vibraphone for The Soulful Strings' *Paint It Black* (Cadet, 1966) and organ, vibes for their second release, *Groovin' With The Soulful Strings* (Cadet, 1967). The Soulful Strings were a Black soul-jazz band, formed in Chicago in 1966 by Richard Evans (with the help of Esmond Edwards and Charles Stepney). Evans was the producer of groundbreaking jazz-soul works like Dorothy Ashby's *Afro-Harping* (1968) and Charles Stepney's eventual collaborator, co-producer for Marlena Shaw's *The Spice of Life* (1969) and Ramsey Lewis's *The Piano Player* (1970). The band mostly used covers as the material for their album releases, and the influence of the lush string arrangements that were featured in their works can be heard quite distinctively on *Come to My Garden*. Phil Wright's call for a session changed the entire trajectory of Stepney's life.

* * *

[34]Edwin Black, "For the Record: Charles Stepney," *Down Beat*, Vol. 37, Issue 23, November 26, 1970.

There are different versions of the story as to how Stepney started his full-time gig as musical director of Chess Records. Stepney's collaborator and friend Gene Barge remembers Stepney coming in for one of his vibraphone sessions at Chess and urged the record company to hire him for his expertise in music theory and ability to aid Barge with copyrighting music.[35] Alternately, Marshall Chess recalls a meeting he had with Stepney at Chess:

> We had a little cafeteria on the eighth floor, and during the course of his first year here, I ran into Charles up there. We were having a cup of coffee, and he had this four-inch thick manuscript with him. He said it was a symphony he'd written. I asked, "Have you heard it?" He said, "How could I? I hear parts of it in my head, and on the piano." I said to myself no shit, because I had some ideas for Cadet Concept. I told him, "I want to work with you, man."[36]

Beginning in 1967, Stepney would work extensively to help build the offerings for Cadet (formerly Chess Records' Argo imprint) and Cadet Concept. Working between the imprints

[35]In an interview with Andria Lisle, Barge recalls: "I was copyrighting music at Chess, and I needed some help. I needed a musician, someone who was good in music theory. Charles Stepney came in for some session on vibraphones. I started talking to him and found out that he could do this, so I suggested Chess hire him, and he got on the staff." See Andria Lisle, "Head Shop: Chess Records Producer Gene Barge," *WaxPoetics*, accessed August 26, 2021, https://www.waxpoetics.com/article/chess-records-producer-gene-barge.

[36]Andria Lisle, "Marshall Chess Cultivated a Stimulating Studio at Chess Records," *Wax Poetics*, Issue 21, February/March 2007.

sharpened Charles's musical point of view and his leadership style. His stern management of sessions came from a place of deep care and an endless search for perfection. Like most afflictions, perfection has the chance to stop even the most talented of creators dead in their tracks. But Stepney's quest for the *ne plus ultra* in his compositions and arrangements was rooted in his viewpoint that he had *earned* a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and that it could be taken from him with one swift decision by the Chess brothers. Perfection also meant a quest in finding balance. Resolute uniqueness. Singularity. He knew all too well that "many recording artists, including some on Chess, are accidental professionals, whose big break was some smart manager's feat."[37] He couldn't play it safe. Every chance to create was a chance to try something new. To do something different. He had the courage to stand alone in his aesthetic, not letting the pressure to churn out "hits" alter his vision and one of a kind sound. Stepney could've easily assimilated to formats that Chess Records excelled in, but his journey toward that which transcended time is what he chose. A frank and honest man, he was so sure of what he liked and did not like. For instance, he strongly disliked rock groups like the Rolling

[37]Edwin Black, "For the Record: Charles Stepney," *Down Beat*, Vol. 37, Issue 23, November 26, 1970, 12. In the aforementioned *Down Beat* interview, Stepney goes on to lament over the inexperience of some of the musicians he worked with: "These artists are musically stupid . . . I swear you've got to stand over some of them and yell out: one-two-three-four—now PLAY! They have no sense of counter-rhythms or polyrhythms, can't hold their part against other parts, don't know a note of music and have no concept of musical balance."

Stones' collapsing "playing louder" with "honest emotion" in their work.[38] For him to "confuse emotion and pain the ear [was] clearly unmusical."[39] He "could be rough," but artists like Maurice White "appreciated the way he always told [them] what he thought. Wise in all things musical, he had high standards and absolutely no patience for treating music like a stepchild."[40] Stepney provided the role of a father/big brother figure to the young artists he worked with. Not to be confused with patriarchal: as in dominant, authoritative. He was stern, but only insofar as he wanted to bring out the best in an artist. His gift was to speak to and with artists in a way not only that was not condescending but also that was straightforward and discerning. The way he "instinctively had a feel for musicians' emotional makeup, quickly identifying their strengths and insecurities" led the musicians that he worked with to "a new understanding and appreciation for what they were doing musically . . . to the point where they actually wanted to please" him.[41]

The year 1969 helped spur his unequivocal approach to arranging, composing, and producing. He not only built the sound of Rotary Connection from the ether of Marshall

[38]Edwin Black, "For the Record: Charles Stepney," *Down Beat*, Vol. 37, Issue 23, November 26, 1970, 12.

[39]Edwin Black, "For the Record: Charles Stepney," *Down Beat*, Vol. 37, Issue 23, November 26, 1970, 12.

[40]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, in collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 164.

[41]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, in collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 137.

Chess's imagination, but he also built the post-Eldee Young–Issac "Red" Holt sound of Ramsey Lewis (*Maiden Voyage*); the early sound of Phil Upchurch (*Upchurch*, 1969), whose mastery of guitar would be crucial to the recording of *Come to My Garden*, and helped Muddy Waters (*Electric Mud*, 1968) and Howlin' Wolf (*The Howlin' Wolf Album*, 1969, also referred to as *This Is Howlin' Wolf's New Album. He Doesn't Like It. He Didn't Like His Electric Guitar At First Either*) find the electronic bend in their soul and blues offerings. His reimagining of the Black American blues tradition gave the world psychedelic blues: a reimagining that was poorly received and even demonized by (white) blues purists. Only in recent years have blues fans changed the tune of their horns regarding his innovation. Not to mention, with Bobby Miller, he brought the Dells a sonic versatility to their ballad making and helped a rising talent like Marlena Shaw land "success" with their version of Ashford & Simpson's penned "California Soul" for her Cadet debut, *The Spice of Life* (1969). The year 1969 allowed him to take the leap needed to create *Come to My Garden*.

Stepney's work on *Come to My Garden* brilliantly showcases his interest in using assemblage. It was his orientation toward composing, producing, and arranging. He gathered what one might find to be "unrelated [musical] objects" and gathered them together, forging his own sonic path. Maurice White described his compositional style in the following way:

> He really knew how to voice piano chords in a way that they left melodic space for the vocals. He stayed away

> from cluster chords. His arranging ability gave me my musical imagination the space to experiment, allowing me the freedom to be even more daring and aggressive with my musical vision.[42]

He would create a five-part traveling symphony orchestra (1968–70) with Ramsey Lewis, which Minnie Riperton appeared at on a few occasions, titled "Cohesion!" It was performed by Oklahoma City Symphony Orchestra, the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, and Toronto Symphony Orchestra.[43]

Although Stepney's compositions on *Come to My Garden* were masterful, it wasn't by chance or luck that he would make one of the most sonically ambitious albums of the 1970s. The album was years in the making. His training, the immense amount of work as a session musician, the volume of compositions he created. What he created was accessible insofar as it took familiar soul sounds and effortlessly returned the use of instrumental strings back to Black composition.[44] Earnest in his pursuits, he never

[42]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, In collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 138.

[43]See "Ramsey Lewis In Symphony Debut," *Cash Box*, December 28, 1968, 108; "To Preem Work (Photo Standalone)," *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 29, 1969; "Jazz Dimensions: Ramsey Lewis And Trio To Star In Jazz Fete," *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 6, 1970, 10.

[44]Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje has extensively written about string instruments in the context of West Africa and their resonances in Black American string traditions and sound cultures. See Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, *Fiddling in West Africa: Touching the Spirit in Fulbe, Hausa, and Dagbamba*

compromised. *Come to My Garden* was his magnum opus: a sonnet dedicated to exploring the quietude, change, darkness, and light of the garden. Finding the kinetic balance between grandeur and quietude in these compositions made for an album that was unlike any other released in 1970. The flutter, thrill, and prickle of his compositions animated the intimacies between life and death. Drawing on his partnership with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (built via Rotary Connection), he used the collective to record the strings for the album. The majority of *Come to My Garden* tracks were previously recorded Stepney compositions. His choice to build upon previous compositions for *Come to My Garden* was received as a "quality package with lasting power."[45] The tender and amorous "Close Your Eyes and Remember," the impassioned and open-ended "A Rainy Day in Centerville," and the euphoric and jubilant "Whenever, Wherever" first appeared on Ramsey Lewis's *The Piano Player*, released in March 1970. *The Piano Player* was recorded in November 1969, around the same time as *Come to My Garden*. Listed as one of *Billboard*'s "Best Selling Jazz LP's" in May of 1970, the album demonstrates Stepney's ability to cut straight to the heart of a composition. Stepney's transcription of the compositions from Ramsey Lewis's *The Piano Player* to *Come*

Cultures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); C. Travis Webb, "An Interview with Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, Professor Emeritus of Ethnomusicology at UCLA," *Signifying Scriptures* (blog), July 9, 2016, https://www.signifyingscriptures.org/an-interview-with-jacqueline-cogdell-djedje-professor-emeritus-of-ethnomusicology-at-ucla/.

[45]"Special Merit Picks: Popular," *Billboard*, December 6, 1970, 65.

to My Garden takes the feature of piano and compositional writing tailored for Lewis's careful, virtuosic play and extends, deepens them by adding strings from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. His use of ornamentation, most noted between *The Piano Player* and *Come to My Garden*, was utilized to undercut the often-alienating pomp and circumstance of orchestral music. His deconstruction of orchestral compositions, enabled by his classical training, allows us to listen to the lower frequencies of Western music traditions. There you can hear the relationship between Black life and how it engendered the excess, fanfare, and indulgence of these music traditions. The initial triumphant and processional qualities of "Les Fleur" from Ramsey Lewis's *Maiden Voyage* (1968) are retained on its reimagining on *Come to My Garden*, as the title changed to "Les Fleurs." The soulful tenor of "Completeness" is held by its rhythm section. Timpani and bass hold on closely to haunting keys, while Minnie sings her siren line: "Cherish me my love, I belong to you."[46] Stepney's composition of the introduction and interlude to "Come to My Garden" provide it with the bookends it needed for Rudolph's lyric meandering and twinkle. The revamped bossa nova swing of "Memory Band" (it was initially composed by Stepney for *Rotary Connection* [1968]) uses staccato singing of the chorus and the staccato play of the horns. There's a boom-bap on *The Piano Player*'s "A Rainy Day in Centerville" created by the kick drum/bass drum playing of Maurice White, which carries over to *Come*

[46]Minnie Riperton, "Completeness," Track 2 on *Come to My Garden*, GRT Records, 1970, Vinyl.

to My Garden. Stepney taught White this style of playing, as told by Larry Dunn (keyboardist, EWF): He added high-mids on the kick drum/kick bass; records didn't have that "thump" before Stepney; Stepney innovated this sound, and now this sound is the norm (his co-production with White on "Shining Star" is the most apparent example).[47]

* * *

Looking at Stepney, always donning an immaculately shaped, thick handlebar mustache and wearing polo shirts or button downs, one wouldn't imagine he shared creative sensibilities, compositional style, and so on with Funkadelic, but he did. Mickey McGill and Chuck Barksdale expressed their dislike of the Stepney-produced and composed *Sweet As Funk Can Be* (1972), but Barksdale has noted that "If Funkadelic did it, it would have come off another kind of way. We were completely out of our bag. It was like an experimental album. Some experiments work and some fail, and that was one of the failures."[48]

Stepney would go on to co-produce and arrange hit albums like Earth, Wind & Fire's *That's The Way of the World* (March 1975) and *Gratitude* (November 1975); The

[47]Kam Bhogal and Leanne Wright, "Celebrating Charles Stepney," World Wide FM, March 26, 2018, accessed August 21, 2021, https://www.mixcloud.com/worldwidefm/celebrating-charles-stepney-26-03-2018/.

[48]Robert Pruter (with assistance from Wayne Jones), "The Dells: Part II: The Soul Years in Chicago, 1960-1972," *Goldmine*, July 20, 1984, 24.

Emotions' *Flowers* (1976), and Deniece Williams's *This Is Niecy* (1976). His consummate play of the Fender Rhodes electric piano and ARP Ensemble Synthesizer on Ramsey Lewis and Earth, Wind & Fire's "Sun Goddess" (from Lewis's *Sun Goddess* 1974) is indicative of Stepney's commitment to excellence in collaboration. Although *Come to My Garden* wasn't the success its contributors hoped it to be, it marked the ascension of Charles Stepney's star. But "in snobbish West Coast music business world, a lot of people who didn't know the Chicago music scene thought Charles was an overnight sensation. It was insulting that he was seen as a Johnny-come-lately—he had such an illustrious body of work."[49] His tragic and untimely passing left a sonic hole in Black popular music, which we can hear resonances of in the continued work of Earth, Wind & Fire, Chaka Khan, and countless others.

He was a central figure in Chicago's Black music community and helped to "bridge the first wave of soul with this new era [1967–75]."[50] More than instituting a new era of Chicago Soul, his fortitude to stick with his aesthetic sensibilities, particularly in a time when genre—"a category of artistic composition, as in music or literature, characterized

[49]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, in collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 203–4.

[50]O'Keefe Reinhard, Paul Lawrence, and Vince Lawrence, "Chicago's Soulful Evolution (1967-1975)," *#312Soul: An Unfinished Retrospective of Chicago's Black Music History*, accessed, August 16, 2021, https://www.312soul.com/1967-1975.

by similarities in form, style, or subject matter"—so heavily policed Black music, revolutionized and anticipated the rise of fusion music.[51] What could a Black avant-garde look like in the hands of a genius like Stepney and a new cadre of young musicians, songwriters, and creators?

[51]"Genre," in *New Oxford American Dictionary* (3rd edition), edited by Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2010).

3
Fusion Music, Black Musical Idiom, and the Law of Genre

They saw I was a black woman, so they immediately put me into a "shbop" slot. I wanted to be accepted as a creative artist. So we just left Chicago and that whole scene and headed for Florida.
–*Minnie Riperton, as quoted in Margo Jefferson, "Stevie's Angel."* Newsweek. *July 28, 1975, 71.*

Although the archival memory of *Come to My Garden* is sparse, its critical reception has revolved around a fondness for the album's novel, imaginative composition and sound. A review in *Cash Box*'s November 28, 1970, issue called the album "new," "different," and "as such it needs more than one listen. Try 'Memory Band,' 'Only When I'm Dreaming,' 'Completeness.' It's worth the effort."[1] Like the *Cash Box* review, early reviews of *Come*

[1]"Newcomer Picks: Cash Box Album Reviews," *Cash Box*, November 28, 1970, 26. Curiously, Riperton's name is spelled wrong twice in the review of the album.

to My Garden linked the album's sonic success to Rotary Connection and Charles Stepney. In December of 1970, a review from *Billboard*'s "Special Merit Picks" said the following about the album:

> From the ranks of Rotary Connection comes the sensitive and soulful stylings of Minnie Riperton who, with producer-arranger Charles Stepney, creates a memorable atmosphere of gentle love and yearning. Ramsey Lewis' group adds rhythm substance to the lovely, sweeping orchestrations and Miss Riperton blossoms as a solo star on "Les Fleur," "Close Your Eyes," and "Whenever, Wherever." A quality package with lasting power.[2]

Come to My Garden has been hailed as "a gorgeous yet downtempo blend of jazz and orchestral soul that also flew under the radar" and "a musical masterpiece swimming in 60s psychedelic imagery surrounded by grand arrangements with a tight R&B rhythm section at its center."[3] Fifty-one years since its release, the album continues to be received with tremendous love and wonder. Despite its positive reception both in 1970 and now, *Come to My Garden* came and went. In 1969, Chess Records and its divisions (Cadet,

[2]"Special Merit Picks," *Billboard*, December 5, 1970, 65.

[3]Marcus J. Moore, "Minnie Riperton: Perfect Angel (Review)," *Pitchfork*, December 5, 2017, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/minnie-riperton-perfect-angel/; Aaron M. Olson, "Mining Gold From the Music Stream: Minnie Riperton—Come To My Garden," *Los Angeles Public Library Blog* (blog), January 27, 2021, https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/mining-gold-music-stream-minnie-riperton-come-my-garden.

Cadet Concept) were sold to General Recorded Tape (GRT). In its acquisition of Chess Records, GRT failed to adequately market and support the album. We could imagine *Come to My Garden* would have fared better if listeners of previous Cadet/Chess/Cadet Concept releases were able to anticipate the release of the album due to "brand recognition": "New to Cadet Concept" versus "New from GRT." It makes sense that GRT failed to support the release *Come to My Garden* if you consider that in 1971 they got rid of Cadet Concept altogether. Almost immediately facing financial woes, GRT/Chess Records "was coming undone. In April 1970, GRT closed the pressing plant in Chicago; a few months later the executive offices were moved to New York . . . within a year, GRT's record division was almost bankrupt."[4] The instant collapse of GRT after its acquisition of Chess was well underway. In its proceedings to acquire Chess, GRT had only come up with $4.7 million of the $6.3 million needed to purchase the company. Leonard Chess "in effect lent GRT $1.79 million at 7 percent interest by agreeing to hold eight separate notes that had staggered due dates."[5] Len Levy, a music industry veteran, had replaced Marshall Chess with the acquisition. The appointment of Levy and his move

[4]Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Clues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (Iconoclassic Books, 2012), 439.

[5]Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Clues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (Iconoclassic Books, 2012), 423–4. Also see: "Music-Records: General Recorded Tape Wrapping Up Takeover of Chess-Checker Co," *Variety*, Vol. 253, Issue 7, 1969, 39.

of the executive offices from Chicago to New York City decreased the staff's morale. Between the manufacturer-turned-recording company's financial nosedive, and the sonic and aesthetic singularity of *Come to My Garden*, the album barely stood a chance at having "success" on the charts.

But the charts don't tell the full story of the album. The significance of this album far exceeds how well the album did or did not do on US music charts. It radically reinterpreted the kind or type (*genre*) of album a Black woman artist could release, and while it aligned with Dionne Warwick's Bacharach/David-pop, it diverged from certain pop sensibilities as much as it built upon Black music traditions. Stepney's compositions and Riperton's methodology departed from more conventional, sonorous ways of organizing sound, opting for dissonant and, often, jarring sounds; using devices and techniques to distort timbre (i.e., mutes for horns) to accentuate higher (vocal) registers. Accordingly, the sonorous qualities of soul music are present, but the use of electronic sounds creates moments of anti-harmony, jolts of disjuncture and discordance. It defied the logics of genre (classifying sound) as an organizing principle for making and understanding Black music and Black sound, and it was a testament to what could happen if you gave young, mostly Black artists the latitude and the structure to showcase the best of themselves, their unparalleled talent, without the pressure to produce a commodity.

* * *

Charles Stepney's previous enlistment of members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as session musicians naturally carried over into the three days of recording for *Come to My Garden* at Ter Mar Studios. In addition to Minnie and Charles, the album featured an ensemble of up-and-coming musicians and songwriters who helped innovate post-1970s Black sound across genres. They became geniuses in their own right.

At the time of recording, the Ramsey Lewis Trio was comprised of bandleader Ramsey Lewis (piano), Maurice White (drums), and Cleveland Eaton (bass). The trio didn't create "the music of mediocrity."[6] Their sound was exceptionally distinct, vested in the expansion of jazz music; and they provided the album its effervescent rumble and swinging rhythm sections. With their efforts, the album takes on a successional quality, signaling the ebbs and flows that animate our natural world, and in the case of the album, a garden.

Working on more than ten albums together (between his solo work and work with the Ramsey Lewis Trio), beginning with *Maiden Voyage*, Ramsey Lewis (the bandleader of the trio) was one of Stepney's longest collaborators. Given his intimate familiarity with almost half of the album's compositions (he recorded "Les Fleur(s)," "Only When I'm Dreaming," for *Maiden Voyage* and shortly before recording for *Come to My Garden*, recorded "Rainy Day in Centerville,"

[6]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, In collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 64.

"Whenever, Wherever," and "Close Your Eyes And Remember" for *The Piano Player*), he was able to reinterpret his takes, while keeping the delicate and sumptuous qualities of Stepney's celestial originals and their revisions. "Whenever, Wherever" is slowed down on *Come to My Garden*. The frenetic flair of the original feel less frantic and rushed in this version. It's as if the composition/notes/playing can't keep up with how quickly Stepney's compositional mind was working. It is the most distinctively Burt Bacharach-inspired tune.

Lewis was thirty-four years old when he and the Ramsey Lewis Trio were tapped for the album. Being a young bandleader, but older than all of the collaborators, outside of Stepney, allowed him to be a mentor to musicians and songwriters who were still finding still finding distinct musical voices to claim as their own. Lewis started playing piano at six years old and was eventually mentored by Dorothy Mendelssohn, who taught him not to "just play the notes; listen with your inner ear."[7] Lewis's father, Ramsey Lewis Sr., was choir director of their church and exposed him to the beatific power of Black song. Soon after, Lewis became the pianist for the choir.[8] It is this experience that cemented Mendelssohn's lessons in *listening* and taught him how to improvise, especially with other improvisers. He later attended Chicago Music College (Roosevelt University),

[7]Len Lyons, "Ramsey Lewis," in *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (New York: Quill, 1983), 201.

[8]Len Lyons, "Ramsey Lewis," in *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (New York: Quill, 1983), 202.

where he was trained classically.[9] Like Minnie Riperton and Charles Stepney, Lewis learned early on that "it would be nearly impossible . . . to make a living concertizing" as a Black musician.[10] In 1956, he formed the original the Ramsey Lewis Trio with Eldee Young (who played bass and cello) and Redd Holt (who played drums). The trio was most known for its 1965 release *The In Crowd*, which was the vanguard of the jazz "fusion" sound(s) that came to dominate 1970s jazz.[11] A year after releasing *The In Crowd*, Eldee Young and Redd Holt left the trio to form their own trio, the Young-Holt Trio, which became the jazz-soul sensation Young-Holt Unlimited. Shortly after Young and Holt's departure, Lewis recruited Maurice White and Cleveland Eaton. Together in the trio, White and Eaton "became [the] rhythmic

[9]Len Lyons, "Ramsey Lewis," in *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (New York: Quill, 1983), 201.

[10]Len Lyons, "Ramsey Lewis," in *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (New York: Quill, 1983), 202.

[11]Despite the album's innovation and success, Lewis recalls getting a lot of slack from listeners who considered themselves jazz "purists": "I have to tell you the musicians at that time really put me down. 'You've got this rock element, rhythm-and-blues, gospel, what are you doing, man? No good, it'll never work.' These were purist listeners who just didn't understand what I was doing. But I'd been playing like that since the mid-fifties in churches. That's black church music—getting down!" Len Lyons, "Ramsey Lewis," in *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (New York: Quill, 1983), 205.

machine" anchoring the sublime and free-floating *Come to My Garden*.[12]

Maurice White was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee. Elvira Robinson played the role of his grandmother (he affectionately called her "Mama") after his biological mother migrated to Chicago at the age of twenty-one. Robinson "was a singer, she sung in church, so [he] was right under her wing."[13] The "soundtrack" of their home was "Mahalia Jackson and Ray Charles," and he was immersed in the Pentecostal music traditions of his/Mrs. Robinson's church.[14] His early introduction to the enmeshment of "sacred" and "secular" in Black music traditions is part of the reason *spirit* has always been central to his music-making process.[15] If "listening" was Lewis's musical episteme, then

[12]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, In collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 64.

[13]Pablo Guzman with Jock Balrd, "Maurice White: Earth, Wind, and Fire," *Musician, Player, and Listener*, January 1982, 47.

[14]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, In collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 8.

[15]For the January 1982 issue of *Musician, Player, and Listener*, Maurice White was interviewed. When asked "Your music and the lyrics are strongly spiritual, and many people tend to view that with skepticism . . .," he responded, "Yeah, of course, because we're taught to do that." The interviewer(s) follows up by asking if "that spiritual thing has always been there, not just in the more recent albums where it's more explicit." White responds, "No, the things that I find myself sharing now with my public, these things were planted in me when I was six or seven years old." See Pablo Guzman with Jock Balrd, "Maurice White: Earth, Wind, and Fire," *Musician, Player, and Listener*, January 1982, 47.

"feeling" was White's. Like most Black youth of 1950s America, White received his *formal* music education from public school. His public school music education "gave [him] an appreciation for all that is beautiful in the world . . . it also gave [him] and many black kids of the early 1950s in this music city of Memphis, Tennessee, dreams."[16] After graduating high school in 1961, White moved to Chicago, eventually becoming a session musician for Chess Records. It was at Chess Records where he met Ramsey Lewis. During his time with the trio, he "learned a lot" and had the opportunity to "grow, to evolve and find out what *I* wanted to do with music."[17] He "believed that playing jazz, [his] first love, was [his] rainbow's end."[18] This is evidenced in his tenacious and exuberant play on "Rainy Day in Centerville." His use of bass/kick drum (a poco a poco crescendo) helps to build the intensity of the track, leading to the thunderous finale. White would go on to be the most commercially successful artist of those who played in the album. There are few greater contributions to the world of music than his founding of one of the greatest bands in the history of (Black) American music, Earth, Wind & Fire (EWF). Co-producing with Charles Stepney on Deniece Williams's first album *This Is Niecy* (1976) and the Emotions' *Flowers* (1976),

[16]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, in collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 19.

[17]Pablo Guzman with Jock Balrd, "Maurice White: Earth, Wind, and Fire," *Musician, Player, and Listener*, January 1982, 47.

[18]Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, in collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 61.

White had a long musical career filled with creative audacity and an embrace of risk.[19]

Cleveland "Cleve" Eaton was born in Fairfield, Alabama, in 1939. He learned to play multiple instruments, including trumpet, piano, and saxophone as a child.[20] It wasn't until he saw his high school music instructor, John Springer, pull a bass out of his car ("for all he knew it could [have been] a body") that he was introduced to the instrument.[21] He went on to attend Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial College (which is now Tennessee State University), graduating with a music degree. After college he left for Chicago, where he'd be a highly sought-after session musician. According to Ramsey Lewis, Eaton "was really in demand in Chicago. . . . He was never without a gig," which is why he was recruited by Lewis to join the trio.[22] Working with jazz giants like Count Basie,

[19]In 2000, he was inducted with EWF into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and individually inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2010. Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, in collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 347–8, 337.

[20]Barnett Wright, "Family Remembers 'Cleve' Eaton, 80, the Jazz Great, Who Died Sun," *The Birmingham Times* (blog), July 6, 2020, https://www.birminghamtimes.com/2020/07/family-remembers-cleve-eaton-80-the-jazz-great-who-died-sun/.

[21]Barnett Wright, "Family Remembers 'Cleve' Eaton, 80, the Jazz Great, Who Died Sun," *The Birmingham Times* (blog), July 6, 2020, https://www.birminghamtimes.com/2020/07/family-remembers-cleve-eaton-80-the-jazz-great-who-died-sun/.

[22]Ramsey Lewis as quoted in Michael J. West, "Cleve Eaton 1939–2020," *JazzTimes* (online), July 10, 2020, https://jazztimes.com/features/tributes-and-obituaries/cleve-eaton-1939-2020/.

who named him "one of the best of all times" and "the Count's Bassist," Eaton "was a rhythmically pushy bassist."[23]

On the album's seventh track, "Oh, By the Way," which features a relaxed swing via bass and drum, he assertively builds the bridge between White's fiery drum play, ringing horns, and Elsa Harris and Kitty Hayward's staccato phrasing harmonized with Riperton's soulful balladeering. The stark break between Riperton's phrasing of "I've known too long-this can't go on . . ." / "Now that I have found a way, it's up to me" parallels Eaton's play, signifying one of many moments where the album traverses the line between soul and jazz. In addition to his work with the trio and Basie, Eaton built his repertoire playing with collectives like the Soulful Strings (*Groovin' With The Soulful Strings* [1967, bass] and *String Fever* [1969, cello]). In 1973 he released his first solo effort with Gamble Records (founded by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff), titled *Half and Half*.[24]

[23]Hollis Wormsby Jr., "The Cleve Eaton Story: God Is In Control," *The Birmingham Times* (blog), February 5, 2015, https://www.birminghamtimes.com/2015/02/the-cleve-eaton-story-god-is-in-control/; Barnett Wright, "Family Remembers 'Cleve' Eaton, 80, the Jazz Great, Who Died Sun," *The Birmingham Times* (blog), July 6, 2020, https://www.birminghamtimes.com/2020/07/family-remembers-cleve-eaton-80-the-jazz-great-who-died-sun/; Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, In collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 64.

[24]*Half and Half* is a jazz-funk rarity. It showcases Eaton's versatility (between his play of electric and acoustic bass) and features covers of 1971/1972 hits, including War's "Slippin' Into Darkness," Aretha Franklin's "Day Dreaming," and The Stylistics's "People Make the World Go Round," and "Betcha By Golly, Wow."

Chicago born and raised, Phil Upchurch's foray into music began when his father gifted him a ukulele around the age of sixteen. A "self-taught" musician, "he first worked professionally with rhythm-and-blues groups (1957–62), and as a session musician in Chicago, recording with such popular artists as Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, and Chuck Berry."[25] Upchurch, who worked with Charles Stepney on his 1969 releases *Upchurch* and *The Way I Feel*, amalgamated jazz and rock styles in his guitar play.[26] Although the electric guitar was his preferred instrument, he also played electric bass. As an in-house guitarist for Chess Records, eventual signed artist, and member of the Soulful Strings, he contributed to Cadet and Cadet Concept releases like Muddy Waters's *Electric Mud* and Howlin' Wolf's *The Howlin' Wolf Album*. When Rotary Connection renamed itself "The New Rotary Connection," Upchurch joined as a member, helping to revamp his instrumental "Black Gold" into "I Am the Black Gold of the Sun." Not many realize that his sometimes improvisational bluesy and rhythmic fusion sounds became the sounds elaborated in the musical universes of Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis (post-1969), Santana, Mandrill, and

[25]Upchurch also worked with Donny Hathaway, who played piano on *Upchurch*, and he contributed guitar play for Hathaway's *Everything Is Everything* (1970), as well as Curtis Mayfield's *Curtis* (1970). Thomas Owens, "Upchurch, Phil," *Grove Music Online*, 2003, accessed November 14, 2021, https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-2000461700.

[26]Phil Upchurch, *Upchurch*, Cadet, 1969, Vinyl.

The Crusaders. Upchurch was a vanguard of playing across Black music idioms. What Upchurch brought to *Come to My Garden* was an invigorating finesse, using uncommon melodic modulations born out of his wealth of musical knowledge. His training in a city like Chicago allowed him to seamlessly move in and through jazz, blues, soul, rock, and R&B.[27]

A self-described "prose and poetry writer," Richard Rudolph penned the lyrics of the majority of the songs on *Come to My Garden*.[28] According to Rudolph, "[Minnie and I] were living in Chicago. . . . Around that time, the late '60s, Minnie's producer, Charles Stepney, read some of my work and suggested that I turn to writing lyrics as well."[29] After encouraging Rudolph to write full time, Stepney gave him his demos for *Come to My Garden*. For Rudolph, "his demos are my favorite things that I've ever heard in life . . . I used

[27]Upchurch has had a long and illustrious career, signing with Blue Thumb after the collapse of Chess Records, where he was a solo artist and session musician for Ben Sidran and the Crusaders. During the 1980s he moved to Los Angeles where he continued to play as a session musician and worked with small and large ensembles. For example, "in 1998 he formed a 20-piece band, the Phil-Harmonic Orchestra." There are few musicians who are more prolific than him. Thomas Owens, "Upchurch, Phil," *Grove Music Online*, 2003, accessed November 14, 2021, https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-2000461700.

[28]Peter Berk, "Richard Rudolph: Veteran Producer Ventures Forth With A&R Records," *Cash Box*, December 22, 1984, 7.

[29]Peter Berk, "Richard Rudolph: Veteran Producer Ventures Forth With A&R Records," *Cash Box*, December 22, 1984, 7.

to listen to them endlessly. Charles would play piano, vibes and melodica on them. They touched such an emotional core in me and I would be so inspired."[30] Stepney's recruitment of Rudolph not only gave *Come to My Garden* its alluring, esoteric flare but changed the trajectory of his life. He would go on to be Minnie's primary collaborator and became a hugely successful writer and producer, working with the likes of Teena Marie, Sheree Brown, and New Edition.[31] In addition to Rudolph's ardent writing, Sidney Barnes, Rose Johnson, and Jon Stocklin penned their own stary reveries.

Sidney Barnes co-wrote "Only When I'm Dreaming" with Charles Stepney. Cast in the darkness of D sharp minor, "Only When I'm Dreaming" is a chromatic vision of love.[32] The mystic reverberations of the first verse, "Birds sing out of tune, songs with no refrain/Nested in purple trees, nothing seems to rhyme," resonate throughout via Barnes's writing. Married with the buoyant and upbeat tenor of the track, Barnes's writing sparkles in its effervescence. A singer, songwriter, and producer, Sidney Barnes was born in Welch, West Virginia. He and his family eventually migrated to Newark, New Jersey. By 1962, after a brief stint with Gemini Records, Barnes broke through when the opportunity came for him to

[30]A. Scott Galloway, Liner Notes, *Petals: The Minnie Riperton Collection*, Capitol Records, 2001, two compact discs.

[31]For more about Richard Rudolph, see Chapter 6, "Conversation with Richard Rudolph."

[32]D sharp minor is a less popular key to compose in, it is used more commonly in compositions for keyboard instruments: the song is a cover of Ramsey Lewis's "Only When I'm Dreaming" from *Maiden Voyage* (1968).

work with Jobete Music, the publishing company of Motown Records, in New York. Raynoma "Ray" Gordy Singleton, a producer and songwriter for Motown Records (also the former wife of Berry Gordy), who at the time was in charge of Jobete Music, recruited Barnes as a songwriter and singer:

> Sidney Barnes was a real find. Handsome, refined, and shrewd, he was also one of the most versatile singers I'd ever encountered. His voice ranged from the lowest bass to the highest tenor, and he could imitate just about anyone's style. On demos he could sound exactly like Smokey or Marvin Gaye or any one of the Temptations.[33]

Shortly after the 1967 Detroit race rebellion, Sidney Barnes moved to Chicago, and eventually signed with Chess Records as a recording artist, songwriter, and producer.[34] He was a founding member of Rotary Connection, and alongside Minnie Riperton he served as a cornerstone for the band's eccentric sound. Barnes also wrote jingles for businesses in the city. The luminous funk-adjacent jingle "The Ember Song," created for the Ember Furniture Co. (that had multiple stores located on the west and south sides of Chicago: 4128 W. Madison Street, 426 E. 47th Street, and 6614 S. Halstead Street) is indicative of Barnes vocal dexterity and nimble writing across genres.

[33]Raynoma Gordy Singleton, *Berry, Me, and Motown: The Untold Story* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990), 141.

[34]Sidney Barnes, "My time in Chicago 1967–1972," #312Soul: An Unfinished Retrospective of Chicago's Black Music History, February 15, 2020, accessed August 16, 2021, https://www.312soul.com/stories.

Rose Johnson, a "poetess," co-wrote "Completeness" and "Whenever, Wherever," two of the album's most lyrically tender and sumptuous tracks.[35] Jon Keith Stocklin co-wrote "Expecting," a track that begins with just Phil Upchurch's stripped-down acoustic guitar play and eventually Riperton's vocals. "Expecting" is the epitome of vocal virtuosity. Minnie's vocal power. Her vocal control. The dynamism of her instrument. The song demonstrates Stocklin's straightforward and economical approach to writing: less is more. Narrating the introspection of a heroine, Stocklin uses the conceit "expecting" to allude to her anticipation of choosing love. Stocklin was born and raised in Illinois. He began actively seeking a career in music while he attended Southern Illinois University in 1963. Stocklin was the lead guitarist of Rotary Connection and like Barnes and Riperton had experience working with Stepney. It seems that Stocklin's growing interest in songwriting began in November 1969, the month *Come to My Garden* and Rotary Connection's *Dinner Music* (1970) were recorded. Many of the songs on *Dinner Music* are penned by Stocklin, who before his writing

[35]Aside from the following line, in A. Scott Galloway's liner notes for *Petals: The Minnie Riperton Collection* (2001), "Another treasure from the *Come to My Garden* sessions is the love song 'Completeness,' one of two songs on the album which Stepney collaborated on with poetess Rose Johnson," my archival research did not return any biographical information about/on Rose Johnson. I hope that future writers about and lovers of this album can succeed where I have failed in animating her life.

on *Dinner Music* and *Come to My Garden* had only written the Rotary Connection single "Want You to Know."[36]

Both Elsa Harris and Marilyn "Kitty" Haywood sang background vocals on the album. Their tandem offered a tactile quality to Stepney's glossy compositions. Harris, a classically trained pianist, "started taking piano lessons at 5 years old. And took classical, classical, classical."[37] She was "a founding member of the renowned Jessy Dixon singers when she was just 23."[38] With the Jessy Dixon singers, "she toured internationally . . . for more than 20 years, including eight years recording and touring with Paul Simon."[39] Haywood,

[36]"Want You to Know" was released as the B-side to a 7" promotional single for DJ's that included "Memory Band." "Memory Band" was released on Rotary Connection's self-titled 1967 release *Rotary Connection*. See Rotary Connection, "Memory Band/Want You to Know" (7", Single, Promo), Cadet Concept, 1970. Jon Stocklin would go on to play with Chicago-based bands like Big Twist and the Mellow Fellows. "Jon Keith Stocklin (2013)," *Chicago Tribune* (via Legacy.com), accessed December 20, 2021, https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/chicagotribune/name/jon-stocklin-obituary?id=2664710.

[37]Jay Shefsky, "For Elsa Harris, Playing Music About Preaching the Gospel, Healing," *WTTW News*, accessed December 21, 2021, https://news.wttw.com/2016/09/08/elsa-harris-playing-music-about-preaching-gospel-healing.

[38]Jay Shefsky, "For Elsa Harris, Playing Music About Preaching the Gospel, Healing," *WTTW News*, accessed December 21, 2021, https://news.wttw.com/2016/09/08/elsa-harris-playing-music-about-preaching-gospel-healing.

[39]Jay Shefsky, "For Elsa Harris, Playing Music About Preaching the Gospel, Healing," *WTTW News*, accessed December 21, 2021, https://news.wttw.com/2016/09/08/elsa-harris-playing-music-about-preaching-gospel-healing.

whose name is wrongly credited as "Kitty Hayward" on the album, was a background vocalist and eventually a "soul artist [signed] to Mercury."[40] Like Harris, she began her musical life in Chicago churches, performing with her sisters, Vivian Harrell and Mary Ann Stewart. She also sang soprano and alto parts for the New Rotary Connection's *Hey Love* (1971) and backing vocals on Terry Callier's 1972 Cadet release, *What Color Is Love*.

Albums run the risk of denoting single authorship, which couldn't be further from the truth. Without the contributions of each of these artists we would not have *Come to My Garden*. Almost equally important, they force us to consider what it might mean to be *in* the universe of American popular music, but *not of it*.

Black Music and the Limits of Genre

Jennifer Lynn Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* details how a "culturally constructed sonic difference" in the United States produced "certain tones, grains, and cadences as 'black'" and dialectically "deemed certain sounds publicly expressive

[40] *Billboard*, July 13, 1974, 20. Kitty, Vivian, Mary, and Vivian's daughter Cynthia Harrell, formed Kitty and the Haywood's would go on to sing with the likes of Thomas Washington and Aretha Franklin (singing background vocals on "Something He Can Feel"). Shermann Thomas, "The Haywood Family Enjoys Decades of Success.," *Chicago Defender*, May 29, 2021, https://chicagodefender.com/the-haywood-family-enjoys-decades-of-success/.

of whiteness."[41] Many concepts and terms have been used to (re)produce the "sonic color line," genre being the chief among them in the twentieth century. Genre has been used to administer the sonic color line across the globe.[42] Although the performativity of genre revolves around stasis and sedimentation, "genres are not static groupings of empirically verifiable musical characteristics, but rather associations of texts whose criteria of similarity may vary according to the uses to which the genre labels are put. 'Similar' elements include more than musical-style features, and groupings often hinge on elements of nation, class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on."[43] In return, genre is a technique emergent of Western modernity (meaning Western colonialism and chattel slavery): a totalizing force for listening between Black *and* white. Genre makes sense of the auditory and vibrational world we live in and are subjected to. The terrain

[41]Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 30, 78.

[42]"Genre," in *New Oxford American Dictionary* (3rd edition), edited by Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[43]David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 3–4. Music scholars like Maureen Mahon have written about the troubles of genre in popular music alongside analyses of race *and* gender. See "They Say She's Different: Race, Gender, and Genre and the Liberated Black Femininity of Betty Davis," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Vol. 23, Issue 2, June 2011, 146–65; Maureen Mahon, "The Rock and Roll Blues: Gender, Race, and Genre in the Songwriting Career of Rose Marie McCoy," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, Vol. 19, 2015, 62–70.

of genre is made most apparent in the circulation of Black (popular) music, but genre is not a nascent phenomenon. Terms like "race music" and "race records" were used to codify early twentieth-century Black music and sound (1920s–1940s). After 1940, a de facto approach to naming and codifying what Black artists and musicians created remained and intensified with the invention of the long play(ing) record (LP).[44] The boom of the LP only intensified the grasp genre had over the critical reception of Black music. Record companies needed genre to sell more records, which is why records that confounded genre at this moment were either wildly successful or flopped. Even without the boom of the LP, genre crystallized "musical meaning" for the purpose of production and consumption, which is why any given music genre "can be seen in the clothing and heard in the language of its musicians, critics, and fans quite apart from the 'music itself.'"[45]

We might think of genre as a disciplinary regime, disciplining Black music into discreet, artificial categories which obliterate Black (American) music traditions and the idioms that emerge from said traditions. The use of genre in this way is intimately linked to the anxieties surrounding traversing the (sonic) color line in the United States. In this

[44]In the afterlife of slavery, all records are *race* records. Is not the typifying of sound, in general, and music in particular, always invested in race-making? Herein lies the tension between Black music traditions and the circulation of Black music and sound via commodities like the LP.

[45]Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 17.

formulation, a presumed biological heredity *qua* whiteness not only eclipses the sexual violence and terror that has historically produced and maintained the color line; what Saidiya Hartman names as the "the inextricable link between racial formation and sexual subjection," but (re)produces the sonic antagonism between Black and white.[46] Inevitably, genre is made possible by the repression of blackness as a foundational logic for popular music in the United States. What is gained in maintaining this antagonism that is rooted in anxieties about miscegenation is non-Black people's ability to accumulate capital from Black music and performance. More sinisterly, via the logics of genre, non-Black people are positioned as the "objective" authorities on Black music. The absence of a governing logic like genre throws into crisis the critical purchase of white music writers as an authority on (Black) music in twentieth-century America. What authority could the white "jazz writer" assert if jazz could no longer be imagined as a pure, artistically, intellectually superior music form, separate from more "lowly" Black music traditions like the blues and soul? Observed by Amiri Baraka as a "Crow Jim" approach to writing about Black music, the *value* of Black music, as (re)produced, for example, by the white music critic, is rooted in the logics of genre.[47] What would be the

[46]Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press), 85.

[47]See Amiri Baraka, "Jazz and the White Critic," in *Black Music* (New York: Akashic, 2010), 13–22. In the essay, Baraka challenges (white) critics to turn to the philosophy of Black music, rooted in Black music traditions, to write about "what has been actually happening in the music itself": "A critic who

implications of turning away from a "Crow Jim" to listening, and to listen to *Come to My Garden* in relation to (Black) musical style and traditions versus listening via the logics of genre? What tensions emerge between listening in this way (the repression of a disciplinary technique) and using genre as a way of accounting for the historicity/naming of Black music formations like "fusion music"? While one could argue Black music is fundamentally idiomatic, the amount of play, destruction, and improvisation that happened in the mid- to late 1960s into the 1970s posed a threat to the constant churn of the American music market and its investment in genre. "Fusion music" and its codified variants (jazz-fusion, jazz-funk, jazz-rock, psychedelic soul, etc.) became shorthand for any work that experimented with Black sound idiom(s).

According to Kevin Fellezs, the author of *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion*, the term "fusion," "as a 'not-quite-genre,' points out the instability of all genre designations and highlights the fluidity of musical practices that genre names attempt to freeze in order to give discussions about music a meaningful starting point."[48]

praises Bunk Johnson at the Dizzy Gillespie's expense is no critic at all. . . . If such critics would (or could) reorganize their thinking so that they begin their concern for these musicians by trying to understand why each played the way [they] did, and in terms of the constantly evolving and redefined philosophy which has informed the most profound examples of Negro music throughout its history, then such thinking would be impossible." Amiri Baraka, "Jazz and the White Critic," in *Black Music* (New York: Akashic, 2010), 19.

[48]Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 17.

Herbie Hancock once remarked that fusion music ("jazz-fusion") "is another idiom. It uses elements of jazz and elements of popular forms, but it established its own idiom."[49] Hancock's use of idiom to discuss fusion music signals to the plurality of forms used in its constitution and also articulates the specificity of its formation, which exceeds the language of "fusion." Fusion, vis-à-vis Hancock, is not a hodgepodge of sounds that exclusively values Black popular music *or* jazz but sees these forms as idiomatic: the "site where an improvisation of/through" sound "in the name of . . . a free, which is to say anarchic and atelic, generativity" allowing for "an improvisation through rather than a deconstructive oscillation within" Western music systems and traditions.[50] In tension with the restrictions demarcated by genre, even if only in its utterance, is the idiomatic nature of Black music (across the Black diaspora). When Black musicians traverse the lines of genre and when they "mix" genre, they are engaging in the radical praxis of *remembering*. Those who came together to create *Come to My Garden* were engaging in this praxis. They made their sound by *building* upon Black music traditions. Not annihilating them. Genre was deprioritized to make way for innovating and cultivating a unique sound that is tailored to the strengths of all of the musicians and artists involved in making the project. Using a term like "fusion," I want to bridge what seems to be

[49]Henry Martin and Keith Waters, *Jazz: The First 100 Years* (Boston: Schirmer), 334.

[50]Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 46.

dissimilar soundscapes to critically conceive how *Come to My Garden* abjured genre. Or to say more pejoratively, how the album was a *fuck you* to the regulatory regime of genre.

* * *

The writing of white critics of Black music post-1967 was governed by "an unreflexive racialized logic . . . helping to restrict certain genres to primary if not exclusive participation by particular racialized groups."[51] By the late 1960s, white consumers' interest in "the new thing"/"avant-garde jazz" was waning; John Coltrane, Billy Strayhorn, and Rex Stewart all passed away in 1967, leaving a giant hole in Black jazz communitas. For *DownBeat*'s Music '68 Yearbook, Leonard Feather's "Pop = Rock = Jazz: A False Musical Equation Dissected," anxiously delineates the line between jazz, pop, and rock:

> Musically, jazz has built up a potent library of sublime achievements; it has made tremendous progress

[51]Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 21. In this context, Dan Morgenstern's "The Year in Review: 1967," for DownBeat's 1968 yearbook, painted a fairly agnostic view on the future of jazz: "The answer, as so many answers to the problems of jazz, is in the final analysis up to the audience. And, of course, it is up to the musician to hold and keep that audience, once he finds it. Though 1967 was far from a red letter year for jazz, one must disagree wholeheartedly with the prophets of gloom and doom. These are not easy times, and not just for jazz. But the music lives, and it shall survive." Dan Morgenstern, "The Year in Review: 1967," *DownBeat*, Music '68 Yearbook, January 1, 1968.

> melodically, rhythmically, harmonically, it has probed beyond harmony into modality, atonality, and aleatory music. Pop, in the main, is as far behind jazz in technical virtuosity and improvisational fluency as jazz is behind rock in verbal creativity. Clearly, these two conclusions do not indicate that one form of music is necessarily superior to the other. They signify only that each aims at a different target, and that for the most part the two are fundamentally different in character.[52]

Feather's "Pop = Rock = Jazz" reads like a hit piece on the "growing rapprochement between the rock and jazz worlds": a response to the anxieties about "mixing" music genres (in 1967–8), ideas about who made "pop" versus who made "jazz" and "rock and roll," and the "progressive" versions of these categorizations. In a piece titled "Focus on Jazz," for the March 16, 1968, issue of *Cash Box*, Mort Fega wrote about the intimacies between "jazz and what is the popular music of the moment."[53] He argued that the unearthing of these intimacies,

> can only have a salutory effect on both areas because it will broaden the horizons for all performers and in so doing, will reach a much wider audience. Jazz has always been regarded as music with a limited audience; pop music, in its endeavor to reach as wide an audience as possible, has usually been of a very elementary nature and often looked

[52]Leonard Feather, "Pop = Rock = Jazz: A False Musical Equation Dissected," *DownBeat*, Music '68 Yearbook, January 1, 1968, 17.

[53]Mort Fega, "Focus on Jazz," *Cash Box*, March 16, 1968, 42.

> down upon by listeners who sought greater musical stimulation. Now, with this recent lend-lease attitude, the pop music has become infinitely more substantial and jazz, with its gleanings from the pop field, is more in tune to embrace those followers of pop music who are ready to graduate to a more sophisticated sound.[54]

Critics who turned away from jazz to proselytize white rockist sensibilities failed to think through the connective tissue between the "avant-garde" turn in jazz and Black music forms like soul, R&B, and rock and roll. By 1970, there were increased debates about where to draw the lines between new forms of play that were emerging in (Black) American music. *Come to My Garden* was released in the wake of these debates. Black popular music forms like "jazz, rock, and funk were positioned in diametrically opposed ways, and by mixing them together" Black "fusion" artists, like those that came together to make *Come to My Garden*, surely felt like, while they were stepping forward in Black music traditions, they were forging a lane all their own. A lonely road, but one that paved the way for others.[55] Albums like *Come to My Garden* effortlessly fused the open and free compositional sensibilities of jazz with the lyrical and vocal sensibilities of soul and R&B. There have been many terms used to describe the sound of *Come to My Garden*. "Psychedelic soul."

[54]Mort Fega, "Focus on Jazz," *Cash Box*, March 16, 1968, 42.

[55]Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5–6.

"Baroque pop." "Bacharach-esque."[56] Its sound amalgamated the tenets of soul, jazz, psychedelica, among a host of other sounds. The album forwent the simplicity of guitar and/or brass based and searched for a polished granularity produced by the use of large ensembles for Stepney's compositions.

Terms like "progressive soul" and "fusion music" tried to account for these innovations in sound, which "rest[ed] in a somewhat comfortable area between the vast popularity of vocal-group pop and the creative freedom of the jazz musician."[57] *Come to My Garden* takes full advantage of a jazz-oriented Black avant-garde tradition that was interested in a radical reclaiming of Black music idioms like the blues. Working with and distorting Western music traditions in favor of Black musical assemblage the album's sonic concession is "the avant-garde is a black thing."[58] The album is "a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic."[59] A sardonic blow to the browbeating insistence on genre: "high" and "low" music forms shan't mix. The anxieties around fusion music were in part due to white critics view of "jazz as music of the individual" and

[56]See: Aaron M. Olson, "Mining Gold From the Music Stream: Minnie Riperton—*Come To My Garden*," accessed November 15, 2021, https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/mining-gold-music-stream-minnie-riperton-come-my-garden.

[57]Vernon Gibbs, "Progressive Soul," *Essence*, August 1973, 55.

[58]Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 32.

[59]Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Black Theatre (Summer, 1968), 29.

their portrayal of the Black music idiom "as a conduit of unhampered human essence and as a mirror of an idealized democratic society."[60]

In a feature for *Essence* in August of 1973, titled "Progressive Soul," Vernon Gibbs describes the emergence of "progressive soul," following genre-bending releases made possible by albums like *Come to My Garden*. On the one end, terms like "progressive soul" signaled a generative "divergence from out of the richness of Black culture" and, on the other end, were weaponized by white critics and music executives, to reproduce the Jim Crow (separate, but equal) logics of the US music market.[61] For example, scholars like Juliana Tzvetkova argue that musical phenomena like "progressive rock" originated in Britain and fused "elements of blues, jazz, avant-garde, and classical music idioms, prog (progressive rock) originated in Britain, becoming the dominant form for middle-class audiences from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s."[62] But progressive rock did not simply "fuse" Black

[60]Fumi Okiji, *Jazz As Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 12.

[61]Vernon Gibbs, "Progressive Soul," *Essence*, August 1973, 55.

[62]Juliana Tzvetkova, *Pop Culture in Europe* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017), 3. According to Tzvetkova, "the main features of progressive [prog] rock are its deep roots in the hippie counterculture of the times and its close relationship to Western classical music. The former reflects the importance hippies attached to the music, while the use of forms such as the programmatic (preconceived narrative, composed to evoke a specific message and ambiance) song cycle of the concept album emphasize the hippies' new drug-induced conception of time." Juliana Tzvetkova, "Progressive (Prog) Rock," in *Pop Culture in Europe*, edited by Juliana

musical elements, it was born out of Black music idioms. What could be of Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, and so on without Black musical idiom? They looked to the music traditions of Black blues and rock and roll artists like Howlin Wolf, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, and Chuck Berry as the blueprints for their work. In this schema, revolutionary rock and roll cuts like Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti" are categorized as "protoprogressive rock" while white artists' expropriation and the white collectivization of rock and roll stands in for "progressive rock."[63] If albums like *Come to My Garden* were "coming out of rock music no less than *Sergeant*

Tzvetkova (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017), 46. Prior to the circulation of terms like "progressive rock" and "progressive soul," Stan Kenton used the term "progressive Jazz" to name what he and arrangers like Pete Rugolo and Bob Graettinger codified as a "more advanced, dissonant, and complex music," that shied away from improvisation. Jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie argued that "progressive" jazz (also termed "modern" jazz) was an invention of US music recording industries, used to sell records. In his autobiography, *To Be or Not . . . To Bop*, he once said, "I think when people figured we might make a lot of money, that started the controversy about who would get credit for creating modern jazz." Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To Be or Not . . . To Bop* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 338. In *To Be or Not . . . To Bop* Gillespie elaborates: "They tried to make Stan Kenton a 'white hope,' called modern jazz and my music 'progressive,' then tried to tell me I played progressive music. I said, 'You're full of shit!' 'Stan Kenton? There ain't nothing about my music that's cold, cold like his.' 'What?' I said, 'there's not one note that I play that was influenced by anything that Stan Kenton has ever done. Not one note, Stan Kenton was the copyist.'" Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To Be or Not . . . To Bop*, 337.

[63]See Bill Martin, *Listening to the Future: The Times of Progressive Rock* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 34.

Pepper's, why separate them from progressive rock" or fusion music, in general?[64]

What is at stake in using these terms is not their imprecision, it is their violent erasure of Black music traditions. Their fundamental denial of the Black intramural. They willfully ignored how Black artists, post-1968 and beyond, built upon Black soundscapes from across space and time. More importantly, this framing fails to understand a primary postulate: Black music is idiomatic, it is pluralistic in its singularity. And its idioms are always fugitive, even in the wake of being hunted by codification/the law of genre. Therefore, the musical amalgamation featured on *Come to My Garden* is not necessarily new as it imaginatively reinvents and re-presents Black music traditions. Its mastery established in its ability to display the idiomatic essence of Black music.

[64]Bill Martin, *Listening to the Future: The Times of Progressive Rock* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 41. What confounds this question is the fact that, as briefly addressed in Chapter 2, Charles Stepney was at the fore of innovating what would become progressive ("prog") rock.

4
On Black Women's Gardens

Notably, Minnie Riperton's *Come to My Garden* uses the place of the garden as its theme. Weaved through the title of the album, its title track, album art, and songs like "Les Fleur(s)" (a cover of Ramsey Lewis's original from his *Maiden Voyage* album of 1968), the garden is key to the album's majestic mystique. The place of the garden, on the one end, encloses the sound of the album and provides its soundscape, which is an ode to the beauty and constant change of a garden, and on the other end, the place of the garden creates a general soundscape that allows for the plurality of sounds on the album. Although the theme of the garden was prechosen by Charles Stepney before the album was recorded, its sound refuses any hint of a planned aim. Quite the opposite. The free and aimless yet purposeful sound made possible by Stepney's arduous labor gives listeners the impression that the theme of the album organically came together, sonically tracing the lifespan of a garden. Like the flow and heavy bounce of newly bloomed wisteria in the late spring, the garden of *Come to My Garden* is vibrant and luminous. Musically, it also reaches to the heavy-hearted gloom of winter sowing. The fifth track

of ten, "Rainy Day in Centerville," which personifies rain to tell the story of a love lost ("Sitting all alone I hear the tapping of the rain / Dance ballerina dance / Talking with the rain in some small city I feel the pain / She's dancing all alone"), uses minor harmonies to emulate the darkness of a rainy day.[1] Morry Roth's rumination on the narrative arch of the album is apt: "Happy songs and melancholy . . . find shelter in a 'Rainy Day in Centerville.'"[2]

Most writing about the album undersells the significance of its theme, if it is addressed at all. Nonetheless, the place of the garden is central. Equally evoked in the album's soundscape, the garden reigns supreme. The arrangement of a garden on the album culls the beauty of Riperton's voice. Its use ebbs and flows from the place of a garden while growing its soundscape across its thirty-eight minutes. The theme theme of the garden is what makes it remarkable. A necessary element of the album's constitution, the (figurative) use of the garden and its elements are a parable about the (de-)territorialization of Black women's creative lives from pathological work vis-à-vis the production of commodities. In this way, Minnie Riperton's *Come to My Garden* is emblematic of what is possible when Black women artists are given the space, latitude, and support needed to cultivate their genius. The thematic of a garden allowed Minnie Riperton's voice to be showcased outside of the logics of music genre

[1]This structure is made apparent in the sample of the track on Nas's "Where Y'all At," produced by Salaam Remi (2013).

[2]Morry Roth, Liner notes for *Come to My Garden*, 1974 Janus Records release.

that hinged upon the success of the album as a commodity for capitalist exchange. Like a budding garden, it was an incubator for Charles Stepney's masterful compositions and Riperton's growth as an artist. The garden de-territorializes the place of Black women's creative lives as consummate to capitalist exploitation while also intimately links to the logics of capital that are made possible by Black people's labor. Instead of the place where "flora and fauna" is taxonomized via the project of the West, the place of the garden is a way to rethink Black women's creative labor outside of the logics of capitalism, while also accounting for its hold over Black women's creative labor. The garden also allows us to listen to Minnie Riperton's voice and vocal performance outside of the logics of genre.

The album art for *Come to My Garden* builds upon the album's sonic personification of a garden. Its photo was shot by Harold Johnson at the gardens of the Bahá'í House of Worship (Bahá'í Temple) in Wilmette, Illinois. "Reflecting Eastern and Western influences" the temple's gardens "contain both rectangular approaches and circular gardens," that encircle all Bahá'í temples. Readings from the Bahá'í religion, like "Les Fleurs," use metaphors "likening human beings to flowers in a garden."[3] Framed by perfectly

[3]"Bahá'í House of Worship," *Chicago Architecture Center* (CAC), accessed December 28, 2020, https://www.architecture.org/learn/resources/buildings-of-chicago/building/bahai-house-of-worship/. Sandra Swanson, "The Annotated: Bahá'í Temple," *Chicago Magazine*, accessed December 13, 2020, http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/January-2007/The-Annotated-Bahai-Temple/.

manicured hedges and grass, Riperton stands singularly. She dons a white keyhole dress that falls straight to the ground. There is a slight crease in the middle of her dress, suggesting movement. Maybe a relieving breeze passed through on a humid day in the Chicago suburb of Wilmette? Her eyes are lowered, staring off into the pink annuals of the garden. Gazing away from the camera she positions the viewer's gaze as imposing and unwelcome. Although "come to my garden" reads as an invitation, her look-away eschews the glance of viewers/listeners. The brightness of her dress intensifies the dichotomy between her solo effort and the implied discomfort of being the center of attention. The themes of the garden and nature of the album and Minnie's clear love for flowers, for example, the magically accoutered baby's breath in her natural (or natchun' as my folks would call it) have inspired many sound and visual artists.[4]

The album art for *Come to My Garden* is a sharp departure from Rotary Connection's releases. As experimental as their psychedelic soul sound was, the album art for Rotary Connection's albums appropriated surrealist aesthetics, making fantastical iconography that played on the use of negative space and dimension. For example, *Aladdin* (1968)

[4]See Barbranda Lumpkins Walls, "Memory Lane," *The Crisis*, Vol. 108, Issue 5, September/October 2001, 58. For example, Solange listed Riperton as one of her inspirations for her 2016 album *A Seat at the Table*, which features Solange with delicately placed clips with a backdrop whose shade is in the family of the iconic album art for *Perfect Angel*. See Tom Breihan, "Solange Shares Her Inspirations For a Seat at the Table," *Stereogum* (blog), September 30, 2016, https://www.stereogum.com/1902296/solange-shares-her-inspirations-for-a-seat-at-the-table/interviews/.

features a cosmic black background, playing up the space between the band shrunken to miniature form and a hookah whose ripped hose snakes the bottom of the front gatefold. The specks of white from the hookah hose, the use of color to outline the Chess Records imprint, the iridescent hookah smoke, and the pop of color from the band's Jodhpuri suits solidify the album's use of contrast. It is also indicative of (white) rock and roll and its obsession with "counterculture" via an orientalist turn to the "East" for its inspiration.[5] *Come to My Garden* builds upon the motif of the garden using visual and sonic ebbs and flows, using the historicity of Black women in their gardens as the material to explore Riperton's emergent artistry.

Gardens are planned spaces, usually set outdoors for display, and provide cultivation of plant varietals or the general enjoyment of various plant life and other forms of nature. They are typically ornamental and thought of as a space of enclosure (Middle English, Anglo-French, Germanic origins). Karl Marx's rendition of primitive accumulation sequesters the garden to "free peasant proprietors" who were driven from their land ("expropriation of small peasants"), which is why the place of the garden in Western modernity is likened to human toil: dispossession, labor, made into

[5]See Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland, "Raga Rock: Popular Music and the Turn to the East in the 1960s," *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 53, Issue 1, February 2019, 57–94; David R. Reck, "Beatles Orientalis: Influences from Asia in a Popular Song Tradition," *Asian Music*, Vol. 16, Issue 1, 1985, 83–149.

capitalist accumulation.[6] Although gardens are rendered idyllic places of peace and wonder, the garden (at least in the Americas) is where a set of Western privations, including conquest and naming, enslavement and dispossession, meet. In her writing on gardens, gardening, and horticulture, Jamaica Kincaid has made clear the relationship between gardens and "the histories of colonization and scientific conquest."[7] Some of the most beloved gardens in the United States were made by enslaved people.[8]

To begin with the garden seems quite fitting as gardens have always figured prominently in Black life and, in particular, in the lives of Black women. In "'A Garden so Brilliant with Colors, so Original in Its Design': Rural African American Women, Gardening, Progressive Reform, and the Foundation of an African American Environmental Perspective," Dianne Glave writes about how Black rural women of the Southern United States built their perspectives about the environment through gardening. Their gardening practice (and really the practice of gardening as a whole) had been shaped by slavery in the Americas. Through gardening,

[6]Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I (New York: Penguin Classics), 879.

[7]Shirley Lau Wong, "The World and the Garden: Ekphrasis and 'Overterritorialization' in Jamaica Kincaid's Garden Writing," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, January 2018, 42.

[8]Jamaica Kincaid on the garden and terrace at Middleton Place (plantation in Charleston, South Carolina): "It is all very beautiful even slightly awesome; and then there is the awfulness, for those gardens and that terrace and those lakes were made by slaves." Jamaica Kincaid, "Sowers and Reapers," *In the Garden, The New Yorker*, January 22, 2001, 42.

they "developed a unique set of perspectives on the environment by way of the gardens they grew as slaves and then as freedwomen."[9] Community knowledge, knowledge passed down from elders and ancestors, immensely shaped Black people's gardening practices. Black people cultivated their gardens with the bare minimum at their disposal, engaging "in complementary roles and with strategies that were designed to support the family unit. Some women met their own and sometimes their family's needs by harvesting vegetables for meals, and by planting shrubs and cultivating flowers to create more appealing homes."[10] In the garden, these privations encounter Black creativity, ingenuity, and, in particular, Black women's creative lives: the latitude to cultivate and create in defiance of the incessant cloud of

[9]Dianne Glave, "'A Garden so Brilliant with Colors, so Original in Its Design': Rural African American Women, Gardening, Progressive Reform, and the Foundation of an African American Environmental Perspective," *Environmental History*, Vol. 8, Issue 3, July 1, 2003, 395.

[10]Dianne Glave, "'A Garden so Brilliant with Colors, so Original in Its Design': Rural African American Women, Gardening, Progressive Reform, and the Foundation of an African American Environmental Perspective," *Environmental History*, Vol. 8, Issue 3, July 1, 2003, 396. In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, Jacqueline Jones elaborates on the function of gardens in the lives of Black women: "Despite their subsistence level wages, black women had priorities that at times superseded money-making. If a woman lived in a small town and cultivated an extensive garden, she might stay at home and feed her family fresh fruits and vegetables, and peddle the remainder at an open air market." Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 133.

domination. For Black women, gardens are fraught places, rife with contradiction: while they have not simply been a place of rest and relaxation, they certainly have been a source of creativity, ingenuity, and self-making.[11]

I had long listened to the album before I ever really saw its album art, but the centrality of the garden on the album resonated with me. My maternal grandmother (b. 1935 Shreveport, LA) had a garden in her backyard filled with mustard greens in the fall and late spring. And although we couldn't visit her as frequently as we liked, my mother's passion for cultivating plants indoors (we never had a home for gardening) made my grandmother's creative life in her garden as clear as day. My mother (b. 1956, Shreveport, LA) cultivated varieties of perennial house plants, like spider plants and cast-iron plants. Resilient yet delicate, their veins resisted any person's intended manipulation. Damned be the push pins that tried to change the direction of their growth. My paternal grandmother (b. 1932, Dallas, Texas) also cultivated the same varietals in her home. She tended to them daily, even just to pull away failing leaves or to run her fingers through their waxy leaves. Their ability to cultivate was rooted in the tradition of Black women tending to their gardens.

[11]See Jamaica Kincaid, "Sowers and Reapers," *In the Garden* column, *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2001, 41: "Why must people insist that the garden is a place of rest and repose, a place to forget the cares of the world, a place in which to distance yourself from the painful responsibility that comes with being a human being?"

Gardens also figure prominently in Black women's art and writing. For example, Joy James, in "Resting in Gardens, Battling in Deserts: Black Women's Activism," remarks, "Black women have tended incredible, secluded gardens within the expansive wasteland of this dysfunctional democracy."[12] In the same essay, James uses an inscription written by Audre Lorde to James in her copy of Lorde's poetry collection *The Black Unicorn* (1978). It reads:

> Reminding you Sister
> Its [*sic*] okay to rest your feet from battles
> But lay in gardens warmed by sun
> Not in spreading deserts near convenient wells.[13]

Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," from her edited collection titled the same, turns to the place of the garden to reimagine "the far-reaching world of the creative black woman."[14] Using her mother's experience as a Black woman living in the US South during the late 1920s, Walker discusses Black women's labor and creative respite that Black

[12]Joy James, "Resting in Gardens, Battling in Deserts: Black Women's Activism," *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 29, Issue 4, 1999, 2. Having to use (sic) in this instance captures the inability of Western languages to confer appropriate meaning to black intramurality.

[13]Footnote one of Joy James's "Resting in Gardens, Battling in Deserts: Black Women's Activism" reads: "This epigram is an excerpt from an inscription written by Audre Lorde to the author in September 1989 in Lorde's collection of poems *The Black Unicorn* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978)."

[14]Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 238.

women were able to cultivate and where generations of Black women have re-defined the liminal roles placed upon them.[15] According to Alice Walker, her mother, like other Black women in the rural South, went to her garden to cultivate a "creative spirit that the black woman has inherited and that pops out in wild and unlikely places," like gardens.[16] The place of the garden is a "break" especially from the types of labor that hoped to steal Black women's joy and time. Walker's quest to "search for our mothers' gardens" is not simply about recovering Black women's creative lives but to map a tradition of Black women's cultivation or art and beauty: to say "no" to the values of Western art traditions. In this way, Black women's gardens are cosmological. They provide knowledge about being of this world that reveals the toil and plunder of the project of the West.[17] *Come to My Garden* is intimately linked with this cosmology. Concretizing the metaphor of the garden on the album is a way of pausing to listen against the commodity (i.e., "the LP") and with Black women's creative labor.

If the garden can be used as a metaphor for Black women's creativity and self-preservation, Minnie Riperton's sonic garden reminds us that Black womanhood is not merely self-

[15]Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 238–43.

[16]Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 1st ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 239.

[17]See Édouard Glissant and J. Michael Dash, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Translated and with an Introduction by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).

evident but produced through praxis engendered by creating, cultivating, and tending, in this instance, to one's garden. We might consider how Riperton's vocal performance of the place of the garden and its figurative use throughout the album poses an antagonism to genre: both as a technique for taxnomizing Black music and the codification of gender as the collapse between sex as biology and gender (the production of gender dimorphism as the discreet categories of "man" and "woman").

Against "genre" and toward the place of the garden, the Black avant-garde tenets of *Come to My Garden* are rooted in Riperton's blurring of Stepney's "written" composition and her own improvisational ad-libs. The "phonic substance" of her vocal performance becomes a "visual manifestation" of a garden.[18] Antagonistic toward a theory of value and Black women's "labor power," Riperton builds a Black avant-garde acoustic environment rooted in Black women's leisure and rest, reminding listeners Black women's gardens are a place where the avant-garde lives and is cultivated.[19] Dissimilar to her work produced post-1974, *Come to My Garden* summons listeners; it is an invitation to a place of sonic seclusion, where the place of the garden is central. The cultivation of sweeping arrangements and Riperton's whistle often defied the structure and organization of Charles Stepney's heartfelt compositions.

[18]The following line is a reversal of Fred Moten's formulation of Beauford Delany's work in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 34.

[19]Charles Wilson, "avant-garde." In *The Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Indelibly, her voice soars throughout the album, but there are also intermittent moments of coalescence between Riperton's vocal performance and Stepney's masterful compositions. The title track "Come to My Garden" and the song "Les Fleur(s)," with their unmistakable use of the metaphor of the garden, best demonstrate the importance of the garden to the soundscape of the album.

A chorus of Black women's voices engenders the album's title track "Come to My Garden." Somewhat unorthodox, Riperton's seemingly bombastic style, accompanied by a fragile and ethereal quality, is imbued with all the knowledge that gardens produce for Black women: stillness, presentness, and rest.[20] She steals time with her dream-like and meditative lull, which is amplified by the softness of the horns. An intermittent rhythm section at the ~1:30 mark and again at the ~2:30 mark try to organize or marshal time, but Riperton's use of consonance and counter melody disorganizes any linear sense of meter. Her offbeat singing in the second verse, "I'll take your hand and lead you from these bad times / I'll take your breath and give you mine / I'll take your hand and lead you where the truth lies / I'll take you with me now," ushers in the care and tenderness needed to tend to a garden. The soar of Riperton's voice on "Come to My Garden" denotes the excess or surplus produced by "the codification of aesthetic and political energies."[21] Her techniques create

[20]See Alice Walker, "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

[21]Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 32.

a built environment rooted in the displacement of genre, as the means to discipline both Black music and aesthetics. The timbre of Riperton's vocal performance of the place of a garden, the qualities of her sound, her tone, are engendered by her use of crescendo and blend.

Retrospectively, the most recognizable song of the album, "Les Fleur(s)," (a typographical error that varies between re-releases of the album; French for "Flowers / The Flower") is the height of Minnie's vocal performance on *Come to My Garden*. In "Les Fleurs" she animates herself as a flower that is budding into bloom. "Les Fleurs" is introduced with a processional of guitar and drums, followed by Riperton's extended yet effervescent vocal techniques. Her sporadic use of crescendo personifies the germination, sprouting, and blooming that occur in a garden. Undulating, her voice swells through the scant use of guitar and drum paired with the blare of horns and waves of strings. Billowing across brass, she amalgamates the rhythm of soul and the minor tonalities of Black avant-garde jazz. Similar to the water that fills the pores, or open space, between soil particles in a garden, Minnie's voice fills up the first and second verses, which are made hollow by the melody of lower range strings (violas, cellos, double bass). Listeners are overcome and disarmed by her ornate and singular performance.

Singing "inside every man lives the seed of a flower / If he looks within he finds beauty and power," in anticipation of her stratospheric whistle, she produces space to rethink the primacy of dimorphic ("male" and "female") biological differentiation in theorizing gender. Fields like Black feminist

theory have interrogated the collapse between biological differentiation and gender differentiation in Western theories of gender. Instead of presuming the human biological phenomenon that is scientifically codified as "male" and "female" equates to gender, Black feminist theorists have turned toward the hybridity of humanness to account for gender difference. They argue that although "the gender opposition had served to enact the raw/cooked, biological/symbolic code by enabling it to be anchored and mapped onto the anatomical differences of the sexes, and therefore had been the archetypal form of all such codes, it is not the code itself."[22] We might treat "Les Fleur" as a text engaging in the same formulations of gender as Black feminist theorists. While "seed" and "flower" may be "biological/symbolic code," for gender as biological sex, the metaphor of flowers ("Les Fleurs") engenders considerations for the processes that produce the hybridity of gender and, thus, humanness. For example, flowers possess both male (stamen) and female (carpels) reproductive structures. (Orchids are also the symbol used by intersex communities.) Using the metaphor of the "seed of a flower" to discuss the hybridity of gender, in this case "men," Western theories of gender that presume "male" and "female" reproductive structures determine one's gender are revised.

The vocal performance uses the metaphor of biological phenomena, via the reproductive capacity of flowers, to

[22]David Scott, "Interview: The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, September 2000, 186.

make a "social" formulation of gender that is particularly compelling for how to contemplate *how* we theorize not only gender but also Black womanhood. Western theories of gender made Black women's "bodies" the conceptual terrain (made material) for theories of humanness rooted in biocentric difference. "Les Fleur(s)," in this instance, nudges us to acknowledge that Black womanhood cannot collapse into the signification of biocentric theories of gender and cannot be made sense of entirely by "the body"/embodiment, even as we acknowledge "the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within."[23] Riperton's sonic place of the garden returns us to the filiation of cultivation and Black womanhood, where sound is capacious; it is related to embodiment but irreducible to the body, predicated upon cultivation: sowing, planting, and growing one's vocal capacity. Her sonic garden frames vocal performance as a self-contained and self-organizing entity much like plants in a garden, worthy of both admiration and study in its own right. The entanglements of nature and culture, exhibited by the fusion of sounds and vocal techniques (between coloratura, legato, trill, whistle, etc.), proffer other ways of thinking about the relationship between vocal performance and Black womanhood.

Her 1974 single from the album *Perfect Angel*, "Lovin' You," is the most popular iteration of her use of voice to build these type of environmental acoustics (i.e., the chirping of birds paired with her whistle), but *Come to My Garden*

[23]Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, "Culture and Countermemory: The 'American' Connection," Summer, 1987, 80.

fully uses the sights and sounds of the garden. As noted by Mitchell Morris in *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s*, songs like 'Lovin' You,' effortlessly fused nature with sound technologies like the electric piano and synthesized strings. The "taped bird calls, present throughout" the track build on acoustics associated with nature, but the genealogy of the fusion of nature and culture in Riperton's music can be traced to *Come to My Garden*.[24]

Did the album's enlistment of the geography of the garden disrupt the false dualism of natural soundscapes and those engendered by sound technologies?

* * *

Stevie Wonder's *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* (1979) was released the same year Minnie Riperton passed away. A detour in his catalog, the album was the score for the 1979 documentary *The Secret Life of Plants*, which was a film about plant sentience based on Peter Tompkins's 1973 book of the same name. For Wonder, he "always figured if [he] did [a score] it would be for a film that raised society's consciousness about black people."[25] Given its ability to

[24]Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 80.

[25]Stevie Wonder as quoted in Andy Beta, "Stevie Wonder: Stevie Wonder's Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants," *Pitchfork*, August 14, 2019, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/stevie-wonder-stevie-wonders-journey-through-the-secret-life-of-plants/. Wonder also used a full orchestra to back

rupture the format of genre in the same vein of *Come to My Garden*, it is no surprise that the album was "an abject commercial failure."[26] And while it might not have had the wide-reaching appeal and popularity of Wonder's previous works, it did, like *Come to My Garden*, remind (Black) listeners of our orientations toward plant life, to ecology. Described as "unapologetically goofy, countercultural, earnest, maybe even a little nerdy," *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* bemused listeners. Expanding Wonder's idea of what *soul* music was and could be, the album included his use of orchestration and electronic sounds via the use of Yamaha GX-1 synthesizers (e.g., the processional grandness of "Ecclesiastes" is only possible with these choices).

"Black Orchid," which parallels "Come to My Garden" in its slow tempo and sweet, demure melody, and "Come Back as a Flower," which takes the same motif of narrating the animacy of being a flower as "Les Fleur(s)," sound and feel like dedications to Riperton. These perceived interrelations between the two might not be so coincidental. It wouldn't be far-fetched to think about how Wonder's *Plants* was shaped by *Come to My Garden* given there was no bigger fan of the album than Stevie Wonder. In a 1974 interview with David Rensin for *Rolling Stone*, Minnie Riperton relayed Wonder's love and adoration for the album. She recalls trying to

up Wonderlove for a staging of *Plants* at the Auditorium Theater (Chicago, IL) in 1979. In other stagings of the album, he employed the Afro-American Orchestra to play the album theme "Earth's Creation." See John Swenson, *Stevie Wonder* (New York: Perennial Library, 1986), 120, 158.

[26]John Swenson, *Stevie Wonder* (New York: Perennial Library, 1986), 117.

quickly introduce herself to Wonder backstage at Chicago's 1971 Black Expo (Black & Minorities Business and Cultural Expo), which was held at the International Amphitheater, Chicago, because "everybody was trying to meet" him:

> It was his first step, he was starting to produce and I was really into his music—so I made it quick. I didn't want to bore him or take up his time, so I said, "I just want to thank you for your beautiful music. You've made me and my family very happy." As I was leaving he said, "Oh thank you, sister. What's your name?" When I told him "Minnie," he freaked. "You're not Minnie Riperton, are you?" He started jumping around. "Oh my God! Is this a dream? I must be in heaven. You're an angel. Your music is fantastic. I've gone through three of your *Come to My Garden* albums, where can I get another? Oh, this is so beautiful! Thank *you* for the work *you've* done!"[27]

In other contexts, Wonder has elaborated on his love for Riperton's work: "That was my heart. I was crazy about Minnie Riperton. Even before I met her, I heard her sing. I felt like no one in the world could come close to singing like Syreeta. Then I heard her."[28] Beckoning the unencumbered spirit of Stepney's and Riperton's collaboration, the album animates the sentience of plant life, using "plant feeling

[27]David Rensin, "Riperton: S'Wonderlove," *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, October 10, 1974, 18. Using the pseudonym, El Toro Negro, Minnie and Stevie would go on to be ghost collaborators on *Perfect Angel* (1974).

[28]Stevie Wonder as quoted in Gail Mitchell, "Stevie Wonder: A Portrait of the Artist," *Billboard*, December 11, 2004, 19.

and desire as a means of disrupting the powerful ways that popular music and culture hierarchize and normalize desire, body, and spirit."[29] The aesthetic purchase of Riperton's *Come to My Garden* and Wonder's *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* confronts us with "how our mechanisms for describing what and how we know physically or psychically are limited by human language," using plant life/a garden to narrate the centripetal movement of Black life toward nature.[30]

[29]Francesa T. Royster, "Stevie Wonder's 'Quare' Teachings and Cross-Species Collaboration in *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* and Other Songs," in *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 67, 68.

[30]Francesca T. Royster, "Stevie Wonder's 'Quare' Teachings and Cross-Species Collaboration in *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* and Other Songs," in *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 78.

5
Contemporary Resonances

Come to My Garden's presence is felt across space and time. Its polyphonic iterations gave artists the sonic blueprint for moving in and out of the terrains of American music. And because of that, Black popular artists and musicians have taken up the album as inspiration for deft and cunning transgressions in Black aesthetics and sound. GRT's failure to support the album sent it underground. That is, until Minnie Riperton's first release with Epic records, *Perfect Angel* (1974). By 1973 Minnie and her husband and songwriting partner, Richard Rudolph, approached by Steve Slutzah, "then a college rep for Epic Records," who heard early demos of *Perfect Angel* and sent them to Don Ellis, an A&R rep for Epic.[1] Ellis loved what he heard and flew to Gainesville to sign her. After signing to Epic the family made Los Angeles their new home.

[1]Marcus J. Moore, "Minnie Riperton: Perfect Angel (Review)," *Pitchfork*, December 5, 2017, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/minnie-riperton-perfect-angel/.

Perfect Angel featured Minnie and Richard's songwriting partnership alongside contributions from Stevie Wonder, who used the pseudonym "El Toro Negro" because of his deal with Motown Records. Richard Rudolph explains:

> Shortly after we met, he agreed to produce *Perfect Angel*, but there was a hitch: Stevie was signed to Motown back then and was afraid they wouldn't let him work on the project. The only way he'd consent to producing the record was if I agreed to co-produce it. Come on—me co-producing with Stevie Wonder? But my presence, along with the pseudonym we came up with for him—El Toro Negro—and the production company we created, Scorbu Productions, provided Stevie with some cover, so I agreed.[2]

Perfect Angel was such a success that, "Chess/Janus Records [decided to re-release] . . . 'Come to My Garden,' which [had] also gone on the charts."[3] Because *Perfect Angel* was most listeners' introduction to Minnie Riperton, *Come to My Garden* must have bemused a new wave of listeners. Not that some of the same sensibilities in *Come to My Garden* don't appear in *Perfect Angel*, nature still plays a role in the acoustic environment of tracks like "Lovin' You," but with the aid of Stevie Wonder's band, Wonderlove, *Perfect Angel* was able to fully harness *familiar* soul-pop sensibilities. It also

[2]Richard Rudolph as told to Harry Weinger, Liner Notes, *Perfect Angel: Deluxe Edition*, Capitol Records, 2017.

[3]Jack Breschard, "Cash Box R&B News Report: r&b ingredients," *Cash Box*, November 30, 1974, 28.

did not help that editorial missteps had Riperton compared to singers like Yma Sumac and named *Perfect Angel* her "first album."[4] After its debut on the *Billboard* 200 Chart on November 16, 1974, *Come to My Garden* peaked at 160 and spent 4 weeks on the chart.[5]

Following the success of *Perfect Angel*, Minnie Riperton went on to record three albums: *Adventures in Paradise* (1975), *Stay in Love* (1977), and *Minnie* (1979). She also continued to work with musical giants like Stevie Wonder, Quincy Jones, and Leon Ware. On Jones's "If I Ever Lose This Heaven," a proto- "Quiet Storm" ballad filled with Riperton's and Leon Ware's syrupy soulful tones, from *Body Heat* (1974), we can hear the versatility of her life's work. She toured with Stevie Wonder's band Wonderlove, headlined a two-week residency at the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas (February 19–March 3, 1976), and continued to write and produce her own music.[6]

[4]See "Spinners and Riperton Open at Greek July 7," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 26, 1975:

> "In the last two decades of pop music only the amazing Peruvian singer Yma Sumac stands comparison to the five octave range of Epic recording star Minnie Riperton. On her first album 'Perfect Angel' she frequently slips into spine-tingling high notes that make her voice indistinguishable from a stringed instrument."

[5]"Minnie Riperton: The Billboard 200 Chart History," *Billboard*, accessed January 14, 2022, https://www.billboard.com/artist/minnie-riperton/chart-history/tlp/.

[6]"Vocalist Minnie Riperton Debuts in Las Vegas," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 19, 1976.

After an almost four-year battle with breast cancer, Minnie Riperton passed away on July 12, 1979, at the age of thirty-one. Much of the archival and public memory of Riperton's life revolves around her untimely death, as well as her advocacy for cancer, including her appointment as a spokesperson for the American Cancer Society and President Jimmy Carter awarding her with the 1977 Cancer Courage Award. Riperton was "thrilled" to serve in the role as spokesperson and fully embraced the opportunity: "I wanted to be a spokeswoman for the association, trying to help other young women save their lives by detecting any early signs of the disease."[7] The significance of Riperton sharing her diagnosis with the world and her advocacy is undeniable. She is one of the few public figures who openly discussed her diagnosis—which she first announced on a 1976 *The Tonight Show* episode hosted by Flip Wilson, encouraging routine breast screenings—and advocated for the right to a mastectomy.

Although "breasts have not always been so highly eroticized[,...] in contemporary Western cultures today, breasts have come to figure as the primary symbols of femininity."[8] For Black women, in particular, mythologies surrounding our

[7]Minnie Riperton as quoted in Gertrude Gipson, "The Minnie Riperton I Knew And Will Always Remember," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 19, 1979. Gertrude Gipson, Los Angeles Sentinel Entertainment Editor granted Minnie "Community Award" for her "outspokenness on cancer, her outstanding talent, and her real inspiration all over the world."

[8]Birgitta Gripsrud, "The Cultural History of the Breast," in *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body*, edited by Victoria Pitts-Taylor, 2 vols. (Westport: Greenwood, 2008), 33.

bodies, beginning with the making of the Western world via the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the colonization of the continent of Africa, have also antagonistically and tenuously hinged our femininity on the monstrosity of our bodies, breasts included. Jennifer L. Morgan notes in her seminal essay, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," English "explorers and travelers to the New World and Africa brought expectations of distended breasts and dangerous sexuality with them," they "used breasts as an identifying trait of beastliness and difference."[9] In a December 1976 interview for *Ebony*, Riperton openly discussed her mastectomy:

> "Just because a woman has had a mastectomy and now has one breast, there's no reason to think that her life has been ruined sexually or physically." Minnie says, "I have three scars—one on my leg, where I was hit by a car when I was a kid, one from having my babies, and now this one. . . . My husband just calls them my 'marks of distinction.' But the one from the operation, well, to me it's just as my husband said—it's the most beautiful thing in the world because it represents why I'm still alive."[10]

[9]Jennifer L. Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 54, Issue 1, 1997, 170, 181.

[10]Bob Lucas, "Minnie Riperton: Singing Star Discusses Her Recent Surgery for Breast Cancer," *Ebony*, December 1976, 42.

The ripples of the pathologizing of Black women's breasts give us some indication for how transgressive it was for Minnie to delink notions of (Black) femininity from the idealization of breasts during the latter half of the 1970s. In anticipation of Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980), Riperton, a "post-mastectomy woman," ruptured the silence surrounding breast cancer to bear witness to the "commonality of isolation and painful reassessment which is shared by all women with breast cancer."[11] For Riperton to be fully present with her diagnosis and still "dare to be powerful, to use [her] strength in the service of [her] vision" gave others the permission to not suffer in silence. Breast cancer was and still is treated individually; Riperton brought a collective consciousness of breast cancer survivors to the fore, making the cast of shame on survivors a little lighter.[12]

There was an overwhelming response to her passing, which included fans writing into Black newspapers like the *Los Angeles Sentinel* to express their tremendous grief. One fan wrote, "I didn't realize how much Minnie Riperton meant to me until I heard that she was gone . . . she touched me and all of my friends, and we all feel such a loss that it is

[11]Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, Second Edition (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1980), 9, 10.

[12]There is greater "advocacy" surrounding breast cancer, but it was then and still is the case that Black women have the highest breast cancer mortality rate in the United States. See "African American Women and Breast Cancer," *Breast Cancer Prevention Partners (BCPP)* (blog), accessed January 12, 2022, https://www.bcpp.org/resource/african-american-women-and-breast-cancer/.

difficult to put into words."[13] Olivia Cook, "a pre-med student at the University of California at Irvine," wrote in the *Sentinel* and shared the following:

> I'm so glad that a black publication took the time to cover her story so well because she was a very special person to me. . . . John Wayne got tons of coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* and Minnie only got a few lines. It's really tragic. It's as if black people don't exist—either in life or in death.[14]

Many public tributes followed, including Teena Marie's second album, *Lady T* (1980), which was co-written and co-produced by Richard Rudolph. The album was "dedicated to MINNIE JULIA RIPERTON RUDOLPH . . . for the eternal light shone upon my heart and the hearts of Mankind."[15] In 1989 at the Universal Amphitheatre, a tribute and benefit concert was hosted by the Minnie Riperton Fund, featuring Stevie Wonder and Quincy Jones, in honor of Minnie's life.[16] Minnie's ability to eventually "crossover" into popular music despite the imposed ideas surrounding her vocal capacity was inspirational and aspirational for artists like Mariah Carey. In a 1998 interview with Danyel Smith for *Vibe*, Mariah Carey cites her mimicry of Minnie at a young age:

[13]Ivory Lee, "Back Down Memory Lane," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 26, 1979.

[14]Ivory Lee, "Back Down Memory Lane," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 26, 1979.

[15]Teena Marie, *Lady T*, Gordy, 1980, Vinyl.

[16]Steve Hochman, "Wonder to Star in Riperton Fund Concert," *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1989.

> My natural voice is low. I have a raspy voice. I'm really more of an alto. But my airy voice can be high if I'm rested. . . . When I was little, I'd listen to Minnie Riperton . . . I would get her records, and I tried but I never could do it . . . I'd talk in this really high whisper and my mom would be like, "You're being ridiculous." I thought if I can talk like that I can sing like that. So I started just messing around with it. I'd practice and practice, and she'd be like, "You're gonna hurt yourself." I'd tell her, "It doesn't hurt. If I were to try and belt two octaves lower than that, that would be a strain."[17]

Mariah's play with sound throughout her career, between white affirmed "pop" sensibilities and trenchant use of Black popular music sounds from R&B and Hip-Hop, also parallels Minnie's quest for musical play and pleasure; to create music she could enjoy and that felt authentically her own. More recently, for Riperton's seventieth birthday (November 8, 2017), *Okayplayer*, in lieu of its *In Hip-Hop and Beyond* playlist series, created a playlist to pay homage to her immense impact on Black music.[18] Well beyond her cancer advocacy, her incredible body of work remains and endures in the wake of her passing. Between singing, songwriting, and producing, few artists left as much of an impact on the music and aesthetics of the 1970s than Riperton. A collective

[17]Danyel Smith, "Higher and Higher," *Vibe*, November 1998, 95.

[18]See Zo, "In Hip-Hop and Beyond: Minnie Riperton [Playlist]," *Okayplayer*, November 8, 2017, https://www.okayplayer.com/originals/in-hip-hop-and-beyond-minnie-riperton-playlist.html.

remembrance of her and her work should be much more attuned to her immense dedication to her craft and disavowal of the machinations of the US recording industry. Fame, "selling records," be damned. What mattered is whether she could bring her full self into what she created and enjoy the process along the way.

Can you hear what I'm saying?[19]

Like Minnie, much of the archival and public memory of Charles Stepney's life is wedded to his untimely death. After *Come to My Garden*, Charles Stepney went on to produce Terry Callier's three releases with Cadet: *What Color Is Love* (1972), *Occasional Rain* (1972), and *I Just Can't Help Myself* (1973). He continued to work with Ramsey Lewis and Maurice White producing a slew of works between the two, the most popular of them being "Sun Goddess" by Lewis, featuring Earth, Wind & Fire. At the age of forty-five, Charles Stepney died of a massive heart attack. Those who had the fortune of knowing Stepney were devastated. Ramsey Lewis was deeply hurt, "It was so unexpected . . . he was such a giant in the music field. We'll never know."[20] In the May 29, 1976, issue of *Cashbox*, Earth, Wind & Fire published a full-page dedication to Stepney:

[19]Minnie Riperton, "Can You Feel What I'm Saying," *Stay in Love*, 1977, Vinyl.

[20]Kam Bhogal and Leanne Wright, "Celebrating Charles Stepney," World Wide FM, March 26, 2018, accessed August 21, 2021, https://www.mixcloud.com/worldwidefm/celebrating-charles-stepney-26-03-2018/.

> Charles Stepney.
>
> Sadly, it is his untimely death that allows us to acknowledge to you now the inspiration he brought to us—as our co-producer, arranger, songwriter and friend. Our gratitude for having known, shared and created with him. Earth, Wind & Fire.[21]

For White, Stepney's impact as a composer and producer was undeniable: "If he had lived, he would have moved on from EW&F, and gone on to be another Thom Bell or Quincy Jones. He just ran out of time."[22] It is very hard to fully capture how much of a profound effect and influence Charles Stepney would have on Black popular music and those influenced by it. His foresight to fuse orchestral, jazz, and Black popular music sensibilities came to influence powerhouse artists, producers, and composers like Patrice Rushen, who named *Come to My Garden* "a game changer" for her trajectory. For Rushen, who always wanted to compose for film, the album gave her a blueprint for how she wanted to approach her work:

> always attracted to textures inside of orchestration . . . and of course because I loved . . . dance music and R&B, as well as jazz, whenever I heard anything that . . . blended or seemed to address any one of those areas, it caught my attention. And this album was pivotal for me, because Charles Stepney had always been one of those arrangers

[21] *Cashbox*, May 29, 1976, 15.

[22] Maurice White, *My Life with Earth, Wind & Fire*, In collaboration with Herb Powell (New York: Amistad: HarperCollins, 2016), 204.

> and orchestrators that I began to understand had—had that—those sensibilities. Total command of those sensibilities, to be able to work with groups like Earth, Wind & Fire, and with Ramsey Lewis, and Soulful Strings, meant that he understood very, very clearly the African and African-American diaspora, but that he had total command of orchestration and of rhythms, and certain kinds of textures, and attitudes that weren't typically a part of music that we would classify as being more urban or classify as being Black or classify as being R&B or pop.[23]

The parallels between Stepney's and Patrice Rushen's trajectory as artists are uncanny. Rushen's career began with a more purist approach to jazz, but her 1977 release, *Shout It Out*, was a break from her earlier Prestige releases and engaged a variety of sounds fusing funk, jazz, and soul. Stepney's work is the connective tissue between artists like Earth, Wind & Fire and Patrice Rushen, who pushed experiments in Black popular sound to the limit in the late 1970s and 1980s. Like Stepney, Rushen's sound not only has always been refined, but it has also embraced unconventional chords and effects, evidenced by her earlier works like *Shout It Out*.[24]

[23]Morgan Rhodes and Oliver Wang, "EP130: Patrice Rushen on Minnie Riperton's 'Come To My Garden' (1970)," *Heat Rocks*, Podcast Transcript, March 26, 2020.

[24]See Brittnay Proctor, "'Shout It Out:' Patrice Rushen as Polyphonist and the Sounding of Black Women's Affectability and Genius," *The Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Vol. 29, Issue 4, 2017.

Moreover, Stepney's ability to build compositions that amalgamate harsh/harder sounds with soft/delicate sounds is heard in the sonic orientation of producer and composer Adrian Younge. Younge, whose work revolves around the marriage of soul and orchestral music, has worked with Ghostface Killah (*Twelve Reasons to Die I* and *II*, 2013, 2015) and in collaboration with the Delfonics's William Hart for *Adrian Younge Presents the Delfonics* (2013). Evoking the organ play of Charles Stepney with the Soulful Strings (*Groovin' with the Soulful Strings*, 1967) "1969 Organ" from *Adrian Younge Presents Venice Dawn* (2000) is a dark, morose, ominous take that uses Stepney's compositional pedagogy; using minor chords and electronic effects to make a concerto using Black popular sounds. Similarly, UK-based Downtempo electronic music acts ("Lo-Fi" bands), like Zero 7, paid homage to Stepney by way of their 2001 remix of Lambchop's "Up With People." The track uses luxuriantly quiet instrumentation to accompany atmospheric vocal harmonies extending Stepney's sound to the lull of seventy-five beats per minute. A litany of hip-hop artists have sampled Stepney's work. To name a few: A Tribe Called Quest sampled Rotary Connection's version of "Memory Band" for its endearing "Bonita Applebaum"; Marlena Shaw's "California Soul" was sampled in Gang Starr's "Check the Technique" (who also sampled Ramsey Lewis's version of "Les Fleur(s)" for their 1989 "Jazz Music"), and "The 'Notic" by The Roots featuring D'Angelo (and an uncredited Erykah Badu), for the *Men in Black* Soundtrack (1997), samples Stepney's co-produced "Shining Star" by Earth, Wind & Fire.

Enamored with its versatility of sound, artists across genres would go on to cover and sample numerous tracks from the album. Jean Carn(e), best known for her Philadelphia Soul banger "Don't Let It Go to Your Head," covered "Completeness" for her 1982 album *Trust Me*. Her version features a thumping rhythm section and exhibits the full range of her five-octave voice. The stark differences would have you thinking it was a Carn(e) original, but soaring vocals, paired with the maintained piano frills and strings on the cut, strictly keep with the original. 4hero's cover of "Les Fleur(s)," featuring "Scandinavian soul" artist Carina Andersson on *Creating Patterns* (2001), departed from its fusion of jazz and electronic music and did a straightforward cover. For 4hero, *Come to My Garden* was "a signature touchstone" and helped the band make "a pivotal artistic turn with *Two Pages* by complementing menacing drum 'n' bass rhythms with lush, transportive orchestrations."[25] The band, in return, also introduced British listeners to the album, making it a "cult classic" in Europe too. Yola, a "country-soul" singer, born in Bristol, England, and a former member of the Phantom Limb has been greatly impacted by the musical contributions offered by *Come to My Garden*. First introduced to Riperton's early career by way of Nuyorican Soul's cover of Rotary Connection's "I Am the Black Gold of the Sun," which builds on the musical hybridity of Stepney's original composition, she "decided to delve deeper into Riperton's discography.

[25]John Murph, "Minnie Riperton Gets a Sonic Love Letter," *NPR*, February 7, 2007, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7220079.

Eventually, she came across *Come to My Garden*."[26] For Yola, Minnie Riperton and the musicians on the album and, in particular, on "Les Fleur(s)," are "so underrated, but that song is so underrated. When you play it, people are like, 'Oh, I think I do know this song. Where has it been? This is epic! Why don't I hear this more?' There's some kind of criminal thing going on in music where people are sleeping on geniuses, and I don't know why."[27] Yola's fearless transgressions across sound are parallel to *Come to My Garden*. Like the release of the album, the problem of genre has also plagued Yola's work. She uses the term "genre fluid" to "describe [her] music."[28] Her music always tries to exceed being pigeonholed into being "a house vocalist or singing R&B or whatever the teeny tiny boxes that [she] was allowed into."[29] The array of sounds that use tracks

[26]Julyssa Lopez, "Yola on Minnie Riperton's 'Les Fleurs': 'It's Pure Genius,'" *Rolling Stone* (online), September 16, 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/yola-minnie-riperton-les-fleurs-500-greatest-songs-1227225/. For more on Nuyorican Soul's cover of "I Am the Black Gold of the Sun," see Mark Anthony Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life: A Rhythm and Blues Nation* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 110–11.

[27]Julyssa Lopez, "Yola on Minnie Riperton's 'Les Fleurs': 'It's Pure Genius,'" *Rolling Stone* (online), September 16, 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/yola-minnie-riperton-les-fleurs-500-greatest-songs-1227225/.

[28]Christiane Amanpour, interview with Ursula von Der Leyen, Filippo Grandi, Justin Chon and Yola, *Amanpour*, Podcast Audio, accessed December 22, 2022, https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/amanpour-ursula-von-der-leyen-filippo-grandi-justin/id1060761517?i=1000536322333.

[29]Christiane Amanpour, interview with Ursula von Der Leyen, Filippo Grandi, Justin Chon and Yola, *Amanpour*, Podcast Audio, accessed December

from *Come to My Garden* as their basis is rather astonishing for a "cult classic" record. From slick and lucid hip-hop tracks like Jurassic 5's "Thin Line" featuring Nelly Furtado, which samples "Les Fleur(s)," to Wiz Khalifa's "No Permission" featuring Chevy Woods. Khalifa's staccato flow laced with Riperton's effervescent whistle and the lucid back-phrasing of Harris and Hayward make for a particularly unique sample of "Completeness."

More generally, the way *Come to My Garden* bucked the regulatory regime of genre has had a ripple effect. A new cadre of Black (popular) artists and musicians have voiced their concerns about "genre" as the means of capturing Black sound/Black music/music made by Black artists and musicians. Artists like Frank Ocean, Moses Sumney, and DΔWN (formerly Dawn Richard) have all insisted that critics and consumers compulsively collapse epidermalization (Black phenotype/white phenotype) with the codification of sound.[30] In a 2011 interview with *The Quietus*, Ocean is

22, 2022, https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/amanpour-ursula-von-der-leyen-filippo-grandi-justin/id1060761517?i=1000536322333.

[30]See Briana Younger, "Black Musicians on Being Boxed in by R&B and Rap Expectations: 'We Fit in So Many Things,'" September 28, 2017, https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/black-musicians-on-being-boxed-in-by-randb-and-rap-expectations-we-fit-in-so-many-things/. FKA Twigs shared similar sentiments in a 2014 interview for *The Guardian*: "When I first released music and no one knew what I looked like, I would read comments like: 'I've never heard anything like this before, it's not in a genre.' And then my picture came out six months later, now she's an R&B singer. I share certain sonic threads with classical music; my song Preface is like a hymn. So let's talk about that. If I was white and blonde and said I went to church all the time, you'd be talking about the 'choral aspect.' But you're not talking about

quoted saying, "in America . . . If you're a singer and you're black, you're an R&B artist. Period."[31] In the same interview he laments about the limits of genre:

> I think so many genres have rubbed off on each other all the time and . . . it's just dated. It's played out, it's over, it's done. Stop. Genres are like, I don't know unless we come up with a new system but I don't think you need that, I think in the arts, what do you need that for?[32]

Frustrations abound among artists like Ocean and in the musical universe of 1970s America, the musicians that came together to make *Come to My Garden* had to contend with this very same problem of genre. What is *Black* music? And what kind of music are Black musicians and artists permitted to make? What would the critical reception of an album that played with Black music traditions be? Especially if that album was made by a Black artist and a majority Black personnel? How would that album be marketed?

Come to My Garden's deconstruction of genre has had influence on (Black) popular culture that breaches music.

that because I'm a mixed-race girl from south London." See Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "FKA twigs: 'Weird things can be sexy,'" *The Guardian*, August 9, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/aug/09/fka-twigs-two-weeks-lp1.

[31]Melissa Bradshaw, "'Imagery, and A Little Bit of Satire': An Interview with Frank Ocean," *The Quietus*, November 22, 2011, https://thequietus.com/articles/07450-frank-ocean-interview.

[32]Melissa Bradshaw, "'Imagery, and a Little Bit of Satire': An Interview with Frank Ocean," *The Quietus*, November 22, 2011, https://thequietus.com/articles/07450-frank-ocean-interview.

In its afterlife, songs from the album, like "Les Fleurs," have been used to accompany visual mediums like films and commercials. Jordan Peele, who has almost singlehandedly reinvented the genre of horror in film, uses "Les Fleurs" for the ominous end to *Us* (2019). A perfect choice for soundtracking. (Spoiler: For those who haven't seen the film, the next line gives away its ending.) Viewers are met with "Les Fleurs" after learning the protagonist, Adelaide, played by actress Lupita Nyong'o, is actually the *tethered* version of herself. A moment where the grand and ornate meet the morbid and absurd, the song is a jarring and abrupt interruption to a less than tidy filmic ending. Mike Knobloch, president of Film Music for Universal Pictures, called the use of "Les Fleurs" "a palate cleanser," noting how the song is "a wink and it lets you off the hook and it allows you to exhale, even if, played against the visual, you're not quite all the way out of the woods. So it really checks a lot of boxes in a very satisfying way."[33] The song was chosen early on in the process of making the film. Peele and Knobloch agreed that no other songs worked nearly as well as the closer to the film. Its choosing was less about the "the lyric or anything on the nose" and more about how its beauty works well when set in relation to the film's haunting ending, which is triggered by Adelaide's (which viewers now know is a tether) sinister smile to her distraught son, who stares back uneasily at her.

[33]Chris Mench, "'Why Jordan Peele Chose Minnie Riperton's 'Les Fleurs' For The End Credits Of 'Us,'" *Genius*, March 25, 2019, https://genius.com/a/here-s-the-song-from-the-end-credits-of-jordan-peele-s-us-minnie-riperton-s-les-fleurs.

From her smile the camera pans across swaths of green pasture, as what we can presume to be tethered's form a wall built out of handholding, as Riperton's voice reverently crescendoes through Richard Rudolph's idyllic lyrics. Jordan Peele's use of the imagery of May 25, 1986's "Hands Across America," which had strangers from California to New York form a human chain built out of holding hands, taps into the pure, "feel good" ethos in the wake of death, violence, and destruction. For Peele "Hands Across America" was built out of the "insistence that as long as we have each other, we can walk blindly past the ugliness and evil that we may be a part of."[34] On top of tapping into the ethos of innocence that permeates American culture, closing with "Les Fleurs" allows Us to reiterate the twinness of the parts of ourselves we greet the world with and those that are locked away, hiding. Maybe separated by space or time, but always linked. It also refers to the American unconscious ("Us" also alluding to the United States): the antiblack and settler-colonial violence foundational to the country. In this moment of the film, "Les Fleurs" disrupts the relationship between beauty and virtue, interrupting our sense of "good" and "bad," forcing us to reckon with the parts of "us" we'd rather deny.

Relatedly, in a 2019 Microsoft Surface commercial, the multidisciplinary artist Maurice Harris, who specializes in floral art, ruminates on what his "imagination looks like," while interfacing with a Microsoft Surface laptop. He sketches

[34]Erik Piepenburg, "'Us' Took Hands Across America and Made It a Death Grip," *New York Times* (Online), March 26, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/movies/us-hands-across-america.html?smid=url-share.

ornate floral arrangements that bloom into a 3D interactive floral arrangement. Here, "Les Fleurs" is used to animate Harris's ravishingly radiant floral art, providing movement and animacy to his illustrations. Naming his aesthetic "natural opulence," Harris's work effortlessly traverses the medium of the floral arrangement and rejects "anybody's idea of what that aesthetic is supposed to be."[35] In his Quibi-produced show, *Centerpiece* (2020), Harris collaborates with Minnie Riperton's daughter, famed comedian and actress Maya Rudolph, to create a floral arrangement that reminds her of her childhood home. Intimately aware of discrepancies between the wealthy who consumed and purchased his floral art versus his inability "to be a rich person," when interviewed by Molly Creeden for *The New York Times* in June of 2020, Harris narrates the same contention between capitalism and art that the creators of *Come to My Garden* faced. He reflexively notes, "I'm making these beautiful things that I couldn't afford myself, and there's something weird here . . . capitalism and creativity and who owns it."[36] One lasting legacy of an album like *Come to My Garden* is the inability of Black art(ists) to reconcile or attend to the foundational demand to create commodities for the sole purpose of accumulating capital, alongside the attempt to

[35]Molly Creeden, "Maurice Harris Is a Superstar. Can He Bend Capitalism to His Talents?," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/style/maurice-harris-flowers-los-angeles.html.

[36]Molly Creeden, "Maurice Harris Is a Superstar. Can He Bend Capitalism to His Talents?," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/style/maurice-harris-flowers-los-angeles.html.

make work for people who are "interested in what was going on [with the work], but don't necessarily have access."[37] Using beauty to entice spectators, artists like Harris are a testament to the treacherous tightrope Black artists have to walk, not only to "earn" what is rightfully theirs, but also to preserve the ethics and integrity of their art-making practice.

* * *

On November 19, 2020, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Come to My Garden*, Charles Stepney's daughters, Charlene Stepney, Chanté Stepney, and Eibur Stepney, hosted a virtual "garden party" in conjunction with Richard Rudolph, Verdine White, Larry Dunn, Junius Paul, Ayana Contrares, Marc Mac, Leanne Wright, Kam Bhogal, and Cosmo Baker.[38] The gathering allowed fans of the album to convene and discuss the enormous impact of the album. It was a testament to the reverberation of the impassioned life force that animates *Come to My Garden*. Out of these reverberations new iterations of Charles Stepney's work have taken shape. For example, Rotary Connection 21: The Charles Stepney Tribute Band, which is a twenty-first-century "revival of the classic band the Rotary Connection," most recently performed on

[37]Molly Creeden, "Maurice Harris Is a Superstar. Can He Bend Capitalism to His Talents?" *The New York Times*, June 22, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/style/maurice-harris-flowers-los-angeles.html.

[38]Stepney Sisters, "Come to My Garden Party," Facebook, November 19, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/stepsgurlz/videos/793144958201983.

June 26, 2021, at Culture in Homewood, Illinois. The band comprises Junius Paul, Makaya McCraven, Alexis Lombre, De'Sean Jones, Jackson Shepherd, Megan McNeal, Brandice Manuel, and Eibur Stepney.[39]

[39]Stepney Sisters and Chanté Stepney, 2021, "Rotary Connection 21," Facebook, June 20, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/events/319911603075286/.

6
Conversation with Richard Rudolph

Richard Rudolph (b. 1946) is a songwriter, musician, arranger, and producer.[1]

In 1967, Rudolph met Minnie Riperton at the rock ballroom the Electric Theater (Chicago, IL) and they eventually married in May of 1971. In 1969 he started at Chess Records as a songwriter. With the encouragement of Charles Stepney, Rudolph penned tracks for Minnie Riperton's debut album *Come to My Garden* (1970), including the title track and "Les Fleurs." Stepney and Rudolph also collaborated on songs for Rotary Connection.

Disillusioned by *Come to My Garden*'s lack of commercial success, Riperton and Rudolph moved their family (son Marc; and Riperton was pregnant with daughter Maya at the

[1]The biography that prefaces this conversation sourced information from the unedited version of the conversation and from Richard Rudolph's liner notes from the deluxe edition release of Minnie Riperton's *Perfect Angel*. See Richard Rudolph as told to Harry Weinger, Liner Notes for *Perfect Angel*, Deluxe Edition, Minnie Riperton, Capitol Records, 2017, 2 compact discs.

time) to Gainesville, Florida. It was there that they would co-write many of the songs that became Riperton's Epic Records debut, *Perfect Angel* (1974).

More than musical collaborators, Rudolph and Riperton were musical partners. Their creative synchronicity was an unintended consequence of their exceptional love for each other. They remained partners in life and in music until Riperton passed away from breast cancer in 1979.

Rudolph's career has spanned a remarkable fifty-two years. He continues to write and produce songs for a new cadre of emerging artists.

The following conversation was conducted on June 22, 2020, via a Zoom video conference. It has been edited for clarity and concision.

* * *

Richard Rudolph: Did you recognize the garden on the front of the *Come to My Garden* album?

Brittnay Proctor: Is that shot at Northwestern?

Rudolph: It is shot at the gardens of the Bahá'í Temple (Wilmette, Illinois).

Proctor: In the suburbs? Oh, my goodness. That is amazing. I'm so interested in that cover just because it's very manicured and resembles Baroque sixteenth-century gardens. And it's beautiful there.

Rudolph: You know, we used to live on the north side. On Columbia Street, actually. We lived in a few places on the south side too. It was a lifetime ago.

Proctor: I'm sure it is much different. Or at least the north side is. Even when I was there, the city was changing so fast.

Rudolph: It was a different world.

Proctor: I'm sure.

Rudolph: Did you know anything about the winters in Chicago when you applied [to graduate school]?

Proctor: I knew. Vaguely. You hear stories and hearsay, but nothing can prepare you for a Chicago winter. Nothing.

Rudolph: No. When we lived there, I was a kid really. I didn't know what I was doing and we didn't have any money. I mean, I bought a few cars then. One of them went for two hundred dollars, one for seventy-five dollars. None of them would start in the winter time. [*laughs*]

Proctor: Oh my goodness.

Rudolph: I used to head off to the South Side of Chicago to teach at King Elementary School. I had a lot of jobs. When I first got to Chicago, I ran a rock ballroom called the Electric Theater, aka the Kinetic Playground. And then when that burned down mysteriously, I did all kinds of things. I drove a nursery school bus on the north side of Chicago. I used to have to walk up to the L in the winter time, get on the train, where it would be at least 90 degrees inside and subzero outside. I would be frozen getting on and by the time I got off I'd be soaking wet. I'd say "hallelujah" and then I'd step out into the freezing air and it was like I was hallucinating. It was amazing. I

could see the crystals congealing before my eyes. It was quite a trip.

Proctor: That is a trip. I'm lucky to have survived the six winters I was there. It was not easy. But you just somehow bear through it, and by the time the late spring/summer comes, it seems like it's all worth it because everyone's out and about and there's so much going on. You feel a little less jaded about having to stay indoors for about four to five months.

Rudolph: Oh, yeah.

Proctor: I wanted to talk with you because, I think I said in the email I sent you that I was researching *Come to My Garden*. For personal interests . . . it is an album I grew up with and that my dad really, really loves.

Rudolph: Really?

Proctor: Yeah. I have a really close relationship to my dad. He's the one that introduced me to the album. Post-grad school, the album came up again for me and I don't know why. I was listening to it a lot. Then I thought, *maybe I should try writing about this*. I started researching and writing about the histories of Black women writing about gardens. Then I started to think about the kind of centrality of the garden to the album; not only in the soundscape of the album but also in the album art. It's a very pertinent theme to the album. And this opportunity came to write this book and I thought this might be the time to hopefully talk with you about this album. To think about . . . the unprecedented ways that the album is thinking differently about genre. [We] talk about a *Bitches*

Brew (1970) and . . . Miles Davis's ability to cross and fuse genres. I feel like this album, being released only less than a year after Miles Davis produces *Bitches Brew* (released March 30, 1970), is doing a lot of the same work, but in a way that seems more open and also interested in destroying the idea that on one end you have Western culture defined "high art" music, meaning, at one-point, avant-garde jazz and then everything else is "popular." What really struck me about the album is that that impulse is not a part of the album. Right?

Rudolph: It's so interesting that your dad was into it and he turned you on to it. I mean, this album has such an interesting life because, as you know, it was on Chess, which was then bought by GRT [General Record Tape], and was tossed out the window and left on the doorstep. GRT was a Canadian company, the Chess brothers finally sold it out to and they brought in this guy, Maurice Levy, to have him run it.

Proctor: Yes. I've heard how much of a mess it ended up being.

Rudolph: Oh, my goodness. Anyway, it was kind of crushing for us because we'd put so much love and hope into *Come to My Garden*. Minnie was such a great, sweet young woman. She was so strong and so secure to do something that was so different. Then we'd left Chicago and everything. And just set out. It was, like you said, "[We've] got to get out of here." We just loaded up the van, which was a Ford Econoline van. I paneled and insulated it and off we

went to drive across the country . . . off into the great unknown.

Proctor: Wow.

Rudolph: We didn't know where we were going and what we were going to do. It was pretty crazy. And on top of everything Minnie was pregnant with Maya.

Proctor: Oh, my gosh.

* * *

Proctor: You talked a bit about the kind of, I would say the inability for folk to really recognize how special the record was, and you talked about how Minnie Riperton; I feel very formal, but I didn't know her, so I feel strange calling her Minnie—

Rudolph: You can call her Minnie.

Proctor: But I'm thinking about Minnie's dedication at that time. In the late fall of 1969, *Come to My Garden* is being recorded. She just finished the album with Rotary Connection, *Dinner Music* (1970). It seems like at the time she's like very focused about her craft and what she's up to [musically].

Rudolph: What I was saying about the album is that it came out and went away. But then it had such an interesting life because it's never gone away, and it's just grown and grown. I'm sure you saw the stuff with [the movie] *Us* (2019) this last year with Jordan Peele. Then after that, with this whole Microsoft Surface commercial ("When Inspiration Strikes, Bring It to the Surface," 2019). Just the other day,

I think, Thursday, the bell rang at my house. They said, "flower delivery." And I said, "I didn't order any flowers." I let him in and it was this beautiful note and this insane arrangement. I have a picture of it and they were from this guy Maurice Harris, who is a great floral artist. And it was just this wonderful note about, "This is just to brighten your day. You and your wife were recommended to me by Ms. Maya Rudolph," I'm thinking, *who is this?* When I sent Maya that commercial she said, "Oh! That's Maurice. He is a good friend of mine." And I went, "Great, who's Maurice?" It turns out he was the wonderful man in that commercial who sent me these flowers. The remarkable thing about all of this is that the album has taken on such a life of its own. But in some ways it's still crazy for me because *it was fifty years ago*!

Proctor: I know, the fifty-year anniversary [of the album] is only a couple months away. What do you make of "Les Fleur(s)" being used in Jordan Peele's *Us*, being used in [Maurice Harris's] Microsoft commercial? What do you make of the reemergence of this album?

Rudolph: When I think about it, I don't know that I am able to truly express how remarkable and amazing it is to me that it is still alive and kicking and touching people's lives . . . [*Rudolph shows me a picture of the floral arrangement from Maurice Harris*]

Proctor: Wow, those are so beautiful.

Rudolph: It was huge, too. I couldn't believe it. With the note was even more beautiful. It was really sweet.

"Thank you for being the change [we] aspire to . . ." something like that. What do I attribute it to? I don't know. You know, you want to go to "a thing of beauty is a joy forever." But, in our world, I realize how serendipitous things are and how I know so many great artists, some of them on that album—

Proctor: Which I would really love to talk to with you about.

Rudolph: You've got Maurice White playing drums. He obviously based Earth, Wind, & Fire [off of] Rotary Connection. That's where he got it and went with it. You probably know, the first two albums featured a woman singing, Sherry Scott, before Philip [Bailey] came in, when they changed to Columbia [Records].[2] Then you had Phil Upchurch playing guitar. One of the greatest guitarists I've ever known or worked with. It's a pity that way too many people in the world have never heard of him.

Proctor: I know, it is a damn shame.

Rudolph: That's what I'm talking about. Recording the album really taught us some interesting lessons very early on. You have to find joy and satisfaction in doing the work. Doing that and whatever it brings. Doing your best. Sure, you'd love it to have universal acceptance and that people love it and to have the world get it. I remember when the album first came

[2]For more information on the life of Sherry Scott, see Jim Washburn, "Sherry Scott Belts out Thrilling Jazz in Her Rich Alto," *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1990.

out and after a few weeks my parents, who were trying to get me to come back to Miami to be in the hamburger business with my father, were trying to discourage me from [pursuing music]. "You know, what the odds are of . . . " And I said, "yeah, yeah, yeah." They said, "Well, dear, the album's out and that song's been out for two weeks now and we've still never heard it on the radio." I responded, "Well, the guy who's running this thing," I was grouching on and on about it. One of my favorite lines [from my mom] was "Dear, he must know something, he is the head of a large company." I said, "He knows something, but it's not what you think." That was a really good lesson for me, too. That people are so willing to bestow Godhead status on people who have achieved some level of notoriety or success or power in one world or another. And it's not always who they really are.

Proctor: Exactly. Titles don't make you.

Rudolph: I meant to ask you, how did your father find that album?

Proctor: My father—interesting story—was actually a student at the University of California, Irvine (UC Irvine). He had to take a leave of absence and eventually drop out because he couldn't manage working full time and being enrolled in school full time. [When] he started at UC Irvine maybe a couple months after he was a freshman student and became a disc jockey at the university's radio station. He was coming across all kinds of music and he told me that he would play the album on the station. It's just

something, since then, he was very, very fond of. My dad was born in 1953. I have an "older" father. He hipped me to a lot [of music].

Rudolph: He's not that old. Ha.

Proctor: I know, but folk of my generation have younger parents. And, comparatively, I had older parents. I don't think my parents are old, but in the grand scheme of things. I took that for granted when I was younger. But now that I'm an adult, I'm very thankful.

* * *

Rudolph: I was curious, what kind of things did you want to ask me? I wish you could talk to Charles Stepney.

Proctor: I know. You mentioned about a lot of the folk working on the album. You have Maurice White, who is part of the Ramsey Lewis Trio. You have Ramsey Lewis, Cleveland Eaton, who is also part of the newly reimagined Ramsey Lewis Trio. You mentioned Phil Upchurch. And you have Charles Stepney at the helm. You are a part of the album; a young Minnie Riperton, who finally gets to be on her own and step out as this vocal genius. You are all on this album! And it's very interesting to me that all of this young, emerging talents, all geniuses in their own right, are coming together to make this album—

Rudolph: On a sixteen-track machine, I believe.

Proctor: Right!

Rudolph: It was crazy. I mean, people don't understand it, but that's part of the magic of it too. I get chills thinking about it. People played together and did something that was so complex and beautiful, yet sounds so simple, elegant, and timeless. It was pretty special. Charles was a genius. When I think about what was happening then versus what is happening now, it's still so interesting to me. I'm still writing full time and working with all these great young artists. Even now it's a different time, there's still so many elements about it that are the same. It's still the combustion of talent, energy, and love of music that makes it all happen. When I first started writing, one of the first meaningful songs that I came up with was "Come to My Garden." I just wrote it on a guitar. I can't sing at all. I never could. But I somehow managed to squeak this out to Minnie and she wanted to share it with Charles. She sang it while I played guitar. We were so excited in those days because we finally got a cassette player that we could record on. We thought it was the height of technology. [*laughs*] But even before then, we had to get somebody to give us money to even go and make a four-track recording demo or whatever. With this we could push a couple of button's and play. So, Minnie took it to Charles. And Charles called me in. He said, "did you write this, kid?" Charles was like thirty-five. He was a much older man to me. He was my first adult male friend. I thought he was pretty old, but he was like thirty-five. [*laughs*]

Proctor: [*laughs*]

Rudolph: He's pretty cool, he's old. [*laughs*] He comes to me to ask, "Did you write this kid? Did you write the lyrics too?" I said, "Yeah." "Can you write lyrics for other people's music?," he asked. I said, "Of course. No problem. What have you got?" Because I would've done anything, right?

Proctor: Right.

Rudolph: The meeting was at Chess Records. At the time, Chess Records was this legendary place. All the people that were going through there. Willie Dixon and Howlin Wolf—

Proctor: And the Dells.

Rudolph: Yeah.

Proctor: And the list goes on.

Rudolph: Come on. Dorothy Ashby. Have you heard [about] Dorothy Ashby?

Proctor: Yes!

Rudolph: *Afro-Harping* (1968). She was great and so was her producer Richard Evans. Amazing talent there. Anyway, it's so funny to me. I started as a kid. The young lyricist working with [*scare quotes*] older people.

Proctor: [*laughs*] What was it like collaborating with Charles Stepney? It seems to me on that album that he fully realizes himself as a maestro and he's able to make arrangements that I think he feels maybe in other contexts he's not able to work on or explore.

Rudolph: No question. He did amazing stuff with the Rotary Connection and in a lot of other cases. But that was, as you know, with Marshall Chess. Right—

Proctor: Right.

Rudolph: It was his idea to combine rock and R&B, kind of. Charles is the one who brought you those incredible arrangements of songs like the Rolling Stones' "Lady Jane" and Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone." Did you ever hear [Rotary Connection's] Christmas album, *Peace* (1968)?

Proctor: [*laughs*] Yes, I love it. I play it during the holidays.

Rudolph: Besides "Last Call for Peace," [*sings*] "Silent Night." Oh, yeah.

Proctor: Yes, I love that cover of "Silent Night."

Rudolph: It's insane. Then Minnie sings the "Silent Night" jazz waltz. It's so beautiful.

Proctor: Yes, it is.

Rudolph: The cat [Charles Stepney] was a heavy weight. He was thrilled he got to do it. [*pauses*] It was hard for him. It was hard in some ways because he felt like—he was classically trained, obviously. He felt like people didn't—probably the same stuff that goes on a lot today in the sense that dealing with the same things that as a Black man, *you're not supposed to be able to do that stuff*, or he wasn't appreciated for doing it. [*pause*] But he did it. I mean, we did some really cool stuff together. Did you ever hear "I Am the Blackgold of the Sun"?

Proctor: Yes. You were a part of making that appear in the universe. Thank you. I love that song!

Rudolph: Me too.

Proctor: It's my favorite Rotary Connection song.

Rudolph: No kidding. Really?

Proctor: Yeah, I love that song.

Rudolph: I was—oh god, I don't remember how many years ago—I was driving home from a meeting I had in downtown L.A. on the on the 10 freeway back out to Santa Monica and I was listening to KCRW, which is, as you know, NPR here. I don't know what I was thinking about. [I'm] listening, and I was thinking, *wow that sounds really cool. What is that?*

Proctor: [*laughs*]

Rudolph: You hear a song and it sounds really familiar. *What was it?* It was Nuyorican Soul—It was them doing "I Am the Blackgold of the Sun." It was such a trip to me. I love that song. I just love that I could do that and put that in that universe. It's really cool. All that work is so great. I was so thankful for the opportunity. Charles really gave me my start. I couldn't believe it. Because when I walked out there and he asked, "Can you write lyrics?," and I said, "Yes, of course. No problem," I thought to myself, *How do I do this?* Because I was just making stuff up as I go. He used to give me these cassette tapes of him playing these melodies and things in his home basement. He'd play piano. He'd play vibes. He'd play melodica. By this time, I was driving a nursery school bus, it wasn't a big yellow bus, it was just a little van. I think the nursery school was called Edgewater Preschool. It was pretty funny because I used to pick up all these kids and they would just tell the most outrageous stories . . . the one's that only seemed to come out of the mouths of five and six-year-old kids. It was hilarious.

After I dropped them off in the morning, I got to keep the van and I would drive to the lake and sit there by the beach with my little cassette player and listen to Charles play these things that were so gorgeous. I wish I had those things today. Just gorgeous, gorgeous things. All those melodies. "Memory Band" and "Rainy Day in Centreville."

Proctor: "Rainy Day in Centreville" is my favorite song on that album.

Rudolph: Really?

Proctor: Yeah. I'm also a sap. I really love compositions that are opulent and dramatic. [*laughs*] It touches me immensely. The arrangement. You know how in certain love-adjacent songs, there's this desire to either one-way paint love as corny and this unrealistic thing that people don't experience in their daily lives and then love as something that folks should despise and hate and be very jaded about? But I feel like there is this narrative arc—even sonically in "Rainy Day in Centreville" that deeply resonates with me as a sap and I really, really love listening to it. [*laughs*]

Rudolph: I love that.

Proctor: I'm just very deeply invested in this album, if you can't tell already. [*laughs*]

Rudolph: That's so wonderful. A lot of times [when] I'm talking to people or to Maya, I'll say it's incredible how lucky I feel and "how lucky you are too," when I talk to her about it. You do things and you don't know. You get to put things into the world from your brain. It's like a song that I wrote for Minnie called

"Never Existed Before" (1979). I mean, obviously nothing's new. We all take from everywhere. But you get to put things in the world and you never know where it goes. I have and subscribe to what I call "the molecules theory." Like molecules, we all take with us the impressions of our random collisions with other people. The energy that you give out will be passed on. Just like the energy of another person. You take it in and pass it on. And if you're going to be gnarly and put out negative energy, it doesn't stop there. The same thing with the positive. It's an incredible thing when you stop and think about how many people's lives you touched. [*whispers*] *And you never know it*. Then, when you actually get to meet somebody that tells you. [*opens arms*]

* * *

Rudolph: I just performed a wedding the other night. Two Saturday's ago. Dr., I'm an ordained minister twice over.

Proctor: Oh, wow!

Rudolph: Well, I got my first doctorate of divinity in August of 1969. [*shows diploma*]

Proctor: Wow. That's amazing.

Rudolph: Then, this is more recent one. [*shows diploma*] But this was August 1969.

Proctor: Wow.

Rudolph: I got it, so I could write letters for conscientious objectors who were trying to get out of the Vietnamese conflict. Friends of mine. Then I performed some weddings in Chicago.
Proctor: That is beautiful.

* * *

Proctor: You wrote the title track, "Come to My Garden," and co-wrote the majority of the tracks on the album. Do you feel like you wrote or even helped to create some of the tracks with Minnie's voice and her vocal performance in mind? Or do you feel like it was a more [organic process]? What was your process in thinking about how to inversely write in relationship to her voice and her vocal capacity?
Rudolph: Well, it's interesting because it's hard to know just how much of it was by osmosis. We were living together and in love. "Come to My Garden" actually came to me in a dream one night. I don't know how. It just happened. Of course, lyrically, she was a huge influence on what I wrote. Charles was creating and writing the melodies and he knew her so well. He was like a big brother to her. It just worked. As you probably know, as a teenager she started working at Chess as a receptionist and background singer. Running upstairs to sing background on the Dells and Etta James and "Rescue Me" by Fontella Bass. And

"Here Comes the Judge" by Pigmeat Markham. Did you know she was on "Here Comes the Judge"?

Proctor: No.

Rudolph: You didn't?

Proctor: No. [*laughs*]

Rudolph: There was this novelty record called "Here Comes the Judge." [*sings*] "Here come(s) the judge." "Here come(s) the judge." The judge says, "Order in this courtroom." And she says "did I hear you say order in the court, I'll take two cans of beer please . . ." you know. But, Minnie had a voice in there too. It was hysterical. She could do all those voices. Maya can do all those voices too. She does all kinds of voice over stuff, now we know where it came from. I'm sorry I got off on such a tangent.

Proctor: It's okay!

Rudolph: Charles knew her and actually—I'm trying to remember all those times she used to stand at the piano with him and do all these amazing vocal gymnastics. She was in a girl's group, the Gems. She would sing all these—all those super high octave notes. She studied opera and sung with Marion Jeffries. Charles really knew what Minnie was capable of. He knew all of her tonalities and all the nuances of her voice. Charles wrote both for himself and some things definitely just for her. That was the great collaboration. I wish I could take more credit for it, but I was just the lucky guy who wandered in the door. Like I said before, it was just amazing to me that he entrusted me to write these lyrics, that he thought

he saw something in me. Because of him, I started. The truth is when I first met him, and he said, "did you write these songs?" And I said, "yeah." He said, "I want to record it." And I said, "Ah, I don't know if you can."

Proctor: Oh, wow.

Rudolph: He said, "why not?" I said, "Because, I don't have a publisher." I didn't understand anything about publishing. He responded, "Oh, kid. You are as stupid as you look." [*laughs*] I had heard that from my father already. But anyways. He said, "You know, you can start your own publishing company to publish your songs." I responded, "Really?" I owe him everything for that. [*whistles*]

Proctor: Wow. I mean, that's—

Rudolph: That's big time.

Proctor: That is.

Rudolph: Because most people would take advantage.

Proctor: Exactly.

Rudolph: I learned a lot from Charles. The good, the bad, and the ugly [*pronounced U-gly*]. But he was a true genius. He obviously wrote, arranged, and produced. He did everything. Charles was a heavyweight.

Proctor: Yes.

Rudolph: And of course, you're familiar with all of his work with Earth, Wind & Fire.

Proctor: Yes.

Rudolph: From that whole production and work with Ramsey [Lewis].

Proctor: Is it true that the Chicago Symphony Orchestra were also a part of some of the recording sessions during those three days?

Rudolph: Oh, yeah. They were here.

Proctor: That's amazing.

Rudolph: It was amazing. I had never seen anything like it up close before. As a kid, I had seen some Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, stuff like that. But I'd never been in the room with great musicians, right in front of me—[*picks up a sheet of paper and simulates reading music*] and go "yeah."

Proctor: [*laughs*]

Rudolph: Like that? It's that easy? Because I was a clown. I didn't know what I was doing. But, Charles was the man. I wish I felt qualified to speak on his behalf.

Proctor: Can I ask you a question about where the concept of the album came from? Do you think that the title track influenced the overall theme of the album, or was there some vision for it?

Rudolph: There was some vision for it. I read somewhere that Minnie wanted to do [something with] the same kind of global reach. They were able to transcend stuff that [Burt] Bacharach and [Hal] David had done with Dionne [Warwick]. Actually, I thought that Charles and I were going to be the next [Burt] Bacharach and [Hal] David.

Proctor: It surely could have been that way.

Rudolph: Had it been on a major label or something like that. Who knows? There are so many things that you never know about life. The other thing besides

my molecule theory that I subscribe to is, I believe that if you do things for the right reasons, something good happens. It's not always what I imagine, but it's usually something good. You can't really bemoan your fate or the past. You don't know where stuff is going to lead. Just like the stuff we were talking about with "Les Fleurs" and "I Am the Black Gold of the Sun," you just never know. I can't tell you how good it made me feel and makes me feel that these songs are still alive and that she's still alive, touching people. That this vibe still exists in the world and is transcending time and space in that way. These things are part of one of the compilations that is called *Love Lives Forever* (1980).

Proctor: Absolutely. I think the one thing that really strikes me about the album is that it's on this precipice of this moment in American popular music that we'll later call "fusion music." But the album never gets—in my mind—included in the discourse on fusion music. Only in that you see an album like Herbie Hancock's *Head Hunters* in 1973 blowing up. And it overdetermines how we're thinking about fusion music. But very much so [*Come to My Garden*] anticipates a lot of the work done in that album and is really fearlessly taking all these sounds that are deemed disparate; taking bossa nova, taking jazz, taking symphonic music, taking soul music, you know, taking all of these "genres" that otherwise wouldn't be together in conversation with one another. And is using them to their maximum, right? I think it's a

shame. Honestly, just because of how radical that kind of move was, at that time.

Rudolph: The other thing we know is true is that had it been a huge commercial success or got the attention of people with you know—we used to say about the musical scene in Chicago: if you wanna make it, you got to leave Chicago. Everybody did at the time. You know, you had to get out of there at the time. It's a different world today, but Maurice [White] had to leave with Earth, Wind & Fire, and on and on and on. But you're right. I see that, too. And it *was* fearless. It really was. It's funny today to run into all this stuff. You run into just like prejudice from all sides. Right? Lots of times I'm writing things today especially with this one guy who I love that I work with and is a constant collaborator. But he's always like trying to edit the lyrics. "You can't say that!" Because if I said something like "Sun dream showers" [the reaction is], "the kids aren't gonna get that." People are still trying to edit or they have predetermined notions of what they think is hip or what they think is acceptable at the time. When I think back on it, it's amazing to me that Charles just let me write. Maybe because he knew that I was trying to hear what was in the music. And that's how I write. I've been so lucky that I was able to find that niche for myself. I start a lot of things on guitar, like "Lovin' You" and other things. A lot of things that I play. I also like when I hear melodies, if they touch me, I hear—*I hear dead people*. [*laughs*] No, I hear music—I don't hear dead people—I hear

the lyrics. I do. I look for the "ideas space." I can hear words and I try to chase them down.

Proctor: Do you think that comes from any early exposures you had to music, growing up in Pittsburgh, or do you think that is something you acquired over time?

Rudolph: Well, we left Pittsburgh when I was kid. I was just nine or ten years old when we moved to Miami Beach, which was not exactly a cultural hotbed at the time. [*laughs*] It was more like *Scarface*. [*laughs*] My father was a Depression-era kid and his father had passed away when he was a teenager and he had to go to work to support his family. He had three younger siblings that he was trying to raise, so he was determined that I was going to be a doctor or a lawyer. There was no talking about poetry or art. But they did have some interest in music. A lot of it was show tunes that I heard. I loved Broadway musicals. And I love that music because as a kid, I heard stories in the songs and I think that was a big influence on me. For some reason, as I got older, I always gravitated toward R&B and jazz music. Then when I met Minnie, it was a fait accompli. I never really got too deep into rock or heavy metal.

Proctor: Which I find so interesting because I think *Come to My Garden*, in a lot of ways, is a turn away from some of the relationship between rock and soul in Rotary Connection's work. The way Minnie is oriented around her voice in Rotary Connection's work and I see *Come to My Garden* as a turn away

from that. And not even a turn away from it entirely, but I think it's a turn toward embracing more of the soul aspects of that sound, as opposed to maybe, part of the rock orientations of Rotary Connection.

Rudolph: Well, Minnie and Sidney [Barnes] were both adjuncts to the Rotary Connection. She didn't get to be featured on the recordings at first. Eventually though, she became the featured performer on stage. It was a whole different story back then. You obviously never saw any of those concerts. They crushed it and Minnie and Sidney were the lead singers. They were the show. That was what was happening. But again, that's the way of the world.

Proctor: That was my suspicion but, as a listener, you never know. You know that one artist's work sounds one way in this context and it sounds different in another. Given my writing and research interests in race *and* gender, it seems that Minnie gets to be on her own in this album. It very well could have been that Charles Stepney's arrangements could have drowned out her voice and they could have been the center of the album. They're *beautiful*. But it seems like, to my earlier point, he is very mindful of her voice and wants to honor it. That's my impression. And in a way that it is not necessarily honored on the work of Rotary Connection.

Rudolph: Oh, yes. No question. This was his goal. We were so young. It's so interesting to see things in retrospect. You learn so many things as you travel through this, through the Matrix.

Proctor: In *Come to My Garden* you see, the use or the fusion between nature and certain acoustics related to nature. And then you see this same kind of sound emerge and in Minnie's later work. And I'm thinking in particular [or] most famously about "Lovin' You." The birds chirping, the kind of acoustics of once again, being in a garden or at least being, outdoors with nature. Would say that maybe some of those sounds that come out of you and Minnie's later work might be traced back to this earlier album or if there is any relationship between two?

Rudolph: Well, it's a huge relationship because of Minnie. That's who she was. She was the essence and the personification. She was pure. She was truly a unique wonder of nature or whatever you want to call it. *And she could do this stuff*. She could just do it. It was crazy how much control she had. But yet, how soft and gentle she could be at the same time. "Lovin' You" has an interesting story, too. When we wrote that, we were in Gainesville, Florida. It was great. I had been carrying the chord progression around with me for a long time. I played it over and over again on the guitar. I must have driven her a little bit crazy over it. After Maya was born, we made a loop of it. We'd put Maya in the swing-a-matic so we could spend a little time together. That's why at the end of the song you hear her sing "Maya, Maya." When we went to record it with Stevie [Wonder] and his band Wonderlove, we recorded that song three different ways: with Stevie playing drums on some

of the takes; different tempos, different approaches. But it never felt like we nailed it. They were all cool takes, but the magic wasn't there. [Stevie] said, "Let's do it the way you did it, when you wrote it. Play it for me again." I played the guitar and Minnie sang it and he said, "Let's do it like that." I said, "Ok, we'll try it like that." So, I went in the studio and just played the guitar to a click track. Of course, it wasn't as easy as it might sound because I had Stevie and Minnie in my headphones, saying the most outrageous things you could ever imagine. Trying to make me crack up.

Proctor: [*laughs*]

Rudolph: [*laughs*] I don't know how many hours it took me to put that thing down. I wanted to kill them both. But by the time we got it all done, we were crying. And it wasn't like today, where—I don't know how much you know about recording techniques and stuff. I could sit down and in less than a minute I could play—We could just take down parts. Sounds great. As opposed to sitting there and playing the whole thing, which I had to do. In front of Stevie Wonder. You have to remember, I am not a great musician. I just learned how to play guitar so I could write [songs]. I didn't learn how to play until I was almost out of college and I had learned how to play rudimentary; my playing was very basic. When Stevie came in and laid these two unbelievable Fender Rhodes parts over the guitar, it became magical. There's no bass on there. There's no drums. There's just Minnie, a bird, and love. But what we didn't know

that with a Black woman singing it, the record company wouldn't release it as a single because it didn't have bass and drums. They said DJs wouldn't play it on the radio—

Proctor: Of course. [*rolls eyes*] A similar predicament with [*Come to My Garden*].

Rudolph: Right! Unfortunately, we seem to still be going through the same stuff now. Then we listened to it and we said, "Wow, this is great. But there's still something missing." [Stevie] asked, "Do you have the original demo?" and I said, "Yes." We went back to listen to what we [recorded] at the house in Gainesville. When we recorded it—oh my god, I wish I still had it—the windows were open. We lived by a duck pond and you could hear birds singing out the window. We said, "Yeah. [That's what's missing.]" Minnie would start singing and the birds would start singing, in response. That's the answer to your question.

Proctor: Wow.

Rudolph: Stevie said, "Get the birds," we went over to the botanical gardens at UCLA with a Nagra [recorder]. Me, Stevie, and Minnie. She would sing and we would get the birds [chirping].

Proctor: That's amazing. Just to see that through line [between *Come to My Garden* and "Lovin' You"], even though it's not necessarily intentional.

Rudolph: If you look at the core of the thing it *is* Minnie. She was a force of nature. Back to my molecule theory. Stevie brings this stuff out of other people and

in the world around her, too. We all do. Obviously, it's magnified with somebody with that kind of talent, but we all do. I wish people would realize that. What you're putting in the world doesn't just—*Well, I'm in a funky mood today, I'm gonna treat people bad*. Everything we put in the world—as we know doctor, energy is neither created nor destroyed.

Proctor: Exactly. I'm right there with you.

Rudolph: The stuff that I'm doing today, I still love the fusion-esque attitude you're talking about. It's not just, to me, jazz fusion. I love bossa nova and jazz-samba. You can hear it in a lot of my songs. "Lovin' You" is the perfect example. That's why I started playing guitar because I loved [Antônio "Tom" Carlos] Jobim and all that stuff. Today, I'm still working with my dear friend Daniel Jobim, who is Tom Jobim's grandson. We're writing together and doing stuff. He's in Rio and we're doing it like this [video chat]. It's pretty cool. But he comes here a lot, too, when he was allowed to.

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Proctor: I'll just ask one last question and then we can wrap things up: What do you hope folks remember about *Come to My Garden*?

Rudolph: What do I hope folks remember? Well, I hope they remember something special about themselves and their lives. I don't know how I wrote stuff like

"Les Fleurs." I get chills thinking about it. I almost want to cry. But, you know that "inside every man." It's there. And I think the way life is, it's like water torture for a lot of people, you know, the *drip*, *drip*, *drip*, *drip*. It just wears away the stone. You can't stop living—I think if somehow we can win this next election, I want to hear that [chorus] being played, "Ring all the bells, sing and tell the people everywhere that the flower has come."

Proctor: Right. Right.

Rudolph: That moment of *ding dong the witch is dead*. It would be so great. That's the meaning—and the things about love that can touch your life. There are so many facets of it. I think I just said this to somebody: We're all standing on the shoulders of everyone who came before [us] and the future, will hopefully stand on ours. People have to remember that what you do, what you put in the world is also forever. Energy just goes on and on. *Come to My Garden* is such a testament to that. I know people say, "I don't feel old at all." But, I don't. There are parts of my body that do, but I'm still kicking. I feel like the same person, except that I think I've learned a lot and maybe I'm more hopeful. But I don't want to stop living. I don't want to stop doing and enjoying and trying to give something back to the world. Be the change that we desire. I think those kinds of things are what I hope for. I also hope that what people get from the album is to know what a gift Minnie was. She left far too soon, but what a transcendent beauty and joy she brought

to the world. That beauty and joy somehow endured and will hopefully live on.

Proctor: I really want to thank you for helping put this magnificent album out into the universe because it's impacted so many people. I think a lot of the intentions of that album carry on in your career, in Minnie Riperton's career; wanting to make music that is not driven by the kind of the external pressures or forces that were impinging upon you by way of "the recording industry." There is a set of commitments that I think comes out of the earlier album that I see travel with you both along your careers. It is very beautiful to see. I don't think that always translates when folk are writing about either yourself or about the work of Minnie Riperton. Also, that the art is carefully done, created with a deep level of care and sincerity. Not even just care in a general sense, but a deep care and sincerity surrounding people, the world, and nature, and what we all have to be and do to be out in the world.

Rudolph: So beautiful. Thank you for saying that. Have a beautiful day.

Proctor: You too.

Epilogue

The masters for *Come to My Garden* were either lost or destroyed. It is unclear how this happened, given the shaky details surrounding General Recorded Tape (GRT) after it acquired Chess Records and its eventual nosedive from 1975 to 1979.[1] Before filing bankruptcy in 1979, GRT sold its assets to All Platinum Records. How did MCA Records ultimately acquire Chess Records masters? And were the masters for *Come to My Garden* a part of that acquisition? It is also unclear how Universal Music Group (UMG) acquired the Chess Records masters from MCA and if, in their deal, they also acquired GRT masters, including those of *Come to My Garden*. It wasn't until the belated reporting on the extent of the 2008 Universal fire—a fire in the backlot of Universal Studios Hollywood, the initial reporting "contained no mention of a music archive in the devastated warehouse"—that the public learned of the backlots tremendous archival

[1]Mike Callahan and David Edwards, "The Chess Story," January 16, 2022, http://www.bsnpubs.com/chess/chesscheck.html. There is little information about the collapse of GRT and MCA Records acquisition of Chess Records masters.

holdings, including Universal Music Group's (UMG) housing of Chess Records masters.[2] To have a copy of the original 1970 GRT release is to have a piece of recording history that cannot be retrieved archivally. Listening between the original GRT release and its re-releases showed me how lucky I was to have a copy of the original. It also made me angry.

* * *

I spent $110 (plus shipping and handling) to purchase a used copy of the 1970 GRT release from an independent seller on Discogs. My copy is described by the seller to have "a few faint scuffs," but overall, it is a "nice player. Clean, clear playback with some occasional light background noise," and the sleeve of the LP "displays edge and corner wear and 3" split from bottom edge on spine." I walk to my audio-technica AT-LP120-USB turntable, remove its dust cover, and turn it on. Carefully, I take the GRT LP out of its cardboard box and remove the plastic sleeve it is held in. The record is already stored separately from the sleeve, but out of my curiosity I want to open the sleeve. Anxiety trickles to my hands when I open the sleeve from fear of extending the corner wear and making the spine split in half. I have never spent this much

[2]Jody Rosen, "The Day the Music Burned," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/11/magazine/universal-fire-master-recordings.html. The backlot archive "housed some of UMG's most prized material . . . it housed master tapes for the storied blues label Chess . . . it held masters for the MCA, ABC, A&M, Geffen and Interscope labels." Almost all the masters housed in the backlot archive were destroyed by the fire.

money on a record and don't have the money to buy another original release or the wherewithal to hunt down another record collector to purchase a copy from. The album sleeve/art is ornamental to most collectors, but for me, it is just as important as the sound quality of the record.

The inside of the left gatefold features song lyrics, and in the bottom left-hand corner there is a small photo of Minnie Riperton, Ramsey Lewis, and Charles Stepney in the studio. Minnie sits in a chair adjacent to a piano. Mid-laugh, she looks at a sunglasses-wearing Ramsey while Charles looks on to Minnie. This is one of the only archival photos that we have of their collaboration on *Come to My Garden*. They look gleeful, happy to be in each other's presence. The inside of the right gatefold is a portrait of a 22-year-old Riperton sitting in a garden (which I assume was also shot at the Baha'i Temple in Wilmette, Illinois). Posing in a multi-color summer dress with her hands crossed and placed on her bended right leg, staring head onto the camera, her gaze unflinching, she emanates a familiar energy: the energy of a timid young Black woman who has yet to realize her power and brilliance. Curiously, none of the re-releases include this photo.

Sonically, my copy of the original is significantly louder and clearer than its subsequent re-releases. It has hints of crackle and pop, but you can so clearly hear the labor of Gary Starr and Stu Black, who engineered the album. The mix is consistent across the album, with the levels favoring a dynamic range. You can clearly hear all parts, and no part of the composition is obnoxiously vying for the ear of the listener. For example, the GRT version of "Completeness" reveals the otherworldly control of Minnie's vocal performance; the tone

of her crescendoes sounds much more varied than in the re-release versions. My turntable is hooked up to two Yamaha S15e speakers, the intense woofer on these speakers makes listening to "Rainy Day in Centerville" on this version instantly more endearing and sonically ostentatious. Listening to the original release reminds me that although the album is pretty and refined, there is an eccentricity that I deeply identify with.

Since its re-release on Janus Records in 1974, *Come to My Garden* has been reissued over a dozen times, across formats (the LP, 8-track, and CD), and even packaged as compilations. For instance, in 1978, the album was shamelessly released as a double LP, paired with Meri Wilson's pop, novelty GRT release *First Take* (1977). The instrumentation of the record sounds hollow, and Minnie's whistle register is much softer on CD needle drops like the Essential Media Group 2009 release in comparison to the original release. It is not clear if the 1974 Janus Records re-release of *Come to My Garden* was made via master recordings (we can assume it was because Janus was a subsidiary of GRT), but re-releases after 1974 are produced via needle-drop (again, the masters were destroyed or lost). The volume of the Janus re-release is lower to the point of having to adjust my Yamaha EMX 62M mixer so that the amplified sound is adequate.

The many re-releases of *Come to My Garden* evidences the continued enthusiasm for and interest in the album and the work of its collaborators. The album was my "*first [musical] love [that] made the world stand still*."[3] Its influence cannot

[3]Minnie Riperton, "Close Your Eyes and Remember," Track 6 on *Come to My Garden*, GRT Records, 1970, Vinyl.

be contained by my narration of it. It is ubiquitous and felt everywhere. My only hope is that my earnest endeavor to write this book makes the album widely and broadly celebrated and accessible, not insulated by the hobby of record collecting, whose norms of scarcity, accumulation, and wealth are overwhelmingly determined through the exploitation and exclusion of Black people.

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119. *The Modern Lovers' The Modern Lovers* by Sean L. Maloney
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